

The 2021 Armenia Political Snap Elections in Post-War Traumatized Public Discourse

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## Table of Contents

<b>I. Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>III. Methodology.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>IV. Psychological Analysis of the Traumatized Armenian Nation.....</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1 Historical Background: Trauma on the Armenian Genes stemming from 1915.....	10
4.2 The Codification of Trauma in Genes and Armenians as Inheritors of Trauma.....	11
4.3 Turks and Turkey: The way Turkey and the ethnonym Turk are codified in Armenians' gene.....	12
4.4 Turkey's Comeback into Armenian Discourse.....	13
4.5 The 2021 Elections and People's Differing Post-war Stress Degrees.....	14
<b>V. 2021 Electoral Process's Discourse Analysis: Media as a Platform in the 2021 Elections to Gain the Trust of the Post-war Traumatized Public.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5.1 Regaining Public Trust.....</b>	<b>16</b>
5.1.1 The Usage of Narratives to Regain Public Trust.....	18
5.1.2 The Usage of Symbols to Regain Public Trust.....	21
5.1.3 Accusations of Opposing Candidates to Regain Public Trust.....	22
<b>5.2 Hate and Violent Speech in Armenian Political Discourse.....</b>	<b>23</b>
5.2.1 Threats and Attacks on Reputation and Dignity .....	25
5.2.2 Encouraging Violence by the Calls of Physical Confrontation.....	27
<b>5.3 Categorization and the Usage of Emotional Manipulation.....</b>	<b>29</b>
5.3.1 Categorizing people based on their political choice.....	32
5.3.2 The usage of emotional manipulation.....	33
<b>VI. Media Analysis.....</b>	<b>35</b>
6.1 Quantitative Research: Internet and Social Media Usage.....	35
6.1.2 Quantitative Research: The usage of news websites.....	37
6.1.3 Quantitative Research: The usage of traditional media.....	38
6.2 Qualitative Research: Media Restrictions.....	40
6.2.1 Qualitative Research: Mis/Disinformation.....	41
6.2.2 Social Media & Websites.....	43
6.2.3 Traditional Media.....	45
<b>VII. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>48</b>

## **Abstract**

This capstone is a research analysis directed at identifying the real roots of an extreme polarisation in the Armenian public after the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war and how the polarisation was reflected and deepened in the 2021 Armenian political elections. The primary thesis of the research is that the polarization in the 2021 elections came from people's differing post-war traumatic depression degrees and their urge to find the "right" candidate who can solve the chaotic situation and save the nation. The research is first based on secondary sources to analyze different concepts, such as the roots of the psychological trauma of Armenians and how the media as a social institution was used in the election campaign to trigger an already traumatized public to react and choose a candidate. The research then brought tens of social media posts produced by candidates to show how different communication strategies are used through social media to influence the public. Finally, the research identified the overall toxic environment that was present on almost all media platforms and showed how the toxicity in media influenced the deepening of polarization in public.

## II. Introduction

The 2021 political election, followed by the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, was a groundbreaking historical event that deepened political chaos and public discontent in Armenia. In the Nagorno-Karabakh 44-day war, Armenia lost a historical homeland, Artsakh, and half of the Artsakh population was displaced. Hundreds to thousands of Armenian soldiers became captivated in Baku as war prisoners, and finally, the war gave approximately 5000 soldiers' lives to this deadly war. The loss of the war and the chaotic situation itself shifted Armenians' mindset, generating fear and causing "mental health issues, including depression and anxiety," which were directed to the most basic human needs, such as the need for survival. (Movsisyan, 2022) Accordingly, the general public conduct of the Armenian population indicated immense dissatisfaction and mistrust towards the Armenian government and the overall leadership system.

The country's leader during the war was Nikol Pashinyan, a bright figure from the 2018 Velvet Revolution who brought "democratic change" and overthrew the oligarchy rooted in Armenia. However, the loss of the war generated huge waves of displeasure among the public towards Pashinyan, thus leading the government to hold snap elections. In the 2021 election, 26 political parties and alliances participated, out of which two were the leading ones: the "Civil Contract Party" led by Nikol Pashinyan and the "Armenia Alliance" led by Robert Kocharyan. The number of candidates in the electoral process can indicate the existing chaos in Armenia as a country which has a population of approximately three million had 26 political opponents and people had a variety of choices, which increased the pressure upon the public to choose the "right candidate" who will "save the nation." In this situation, the public mainly chose two names, Nikol Pashinyan and Robert Kocharyan, to be elected and become the saviors of the country.

However, it is important to note that "political parties in Armenia do not differentiate among themselves on the basis of ideology," but these political parties are based on the leadership of an individual—they are personalistic parties. (Izquierdo-Iranzo, p.5, 2024) While there was no core ideological difference between the political party Civil Contract and the Armenia Alliance, the public during these elections got extremely polarised to the point where inside one nation, where "Christian Armenians are estimated to be 98.1% of the whole population," became two intolerant and extreme oppositions. (The Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2025)

In the electoral process, both candidates needed the attention of the whole public, and as the physical context of the public was insufficient to ensure the widespread effect of their campaigns, the entire process was moved to media platforms. Each candidate used media and employed different manipulative speeches and offensive announcements, which were expanded into a bigger context, integrating the public in it, where the online war caused divisions, leading people to hate and be intolerant towards each other's views and beliefs. As a result, the media, as a social institution, was a huge setting for opposing candidates to capture the attention of the whole public and lead them to take opposing sides. However, the media itself, the candidate's intentions to attract the public, and differing opinions were not the main pillars of the polarization, but these were merely tools of an engine to turn the existing public depression into a "struggle for survival." In this context, the struggle for survival could only be achieved via participating in the election process and choosing the "right" candidate.

The consequences of the war were various, ranging from personal to national loss:

- The 5000 soldiers' lives, loss of homeland, and loss of finances indicated immediate mental health effects on the general public.

- The country with a population of only three million and losing 5000 people, mostly 18-25 males, indicated generation production problems.
- The country, which is only 29,743 square kilometers and has lost 4,400 square kilometers, indicated a considerable loss of resources.

All these facets combined indicate that the country and its people were in tremendous danger, and psychologically, physically, and emotionally, people were detached from rational behavior. As a result, the radical polarization that happened in the 2021 political elections had a deeper root, which came from people's differing post-war traumatic depression degrees and their urge to find the right path (candidate) to survive. In this circumstance, the media, the candidates, and the public's differing opinions were not the main factors of the polarization but were merely tools to turn the existing public depression into a struggle for survival.

### **III. Methodology**

This research aims to show what precisely in the 2021 political elections triggered the public to become radically polarised, and the findings show that the polarisation was not the result of differing political ideologies or other triggering media content but directly came from people's differing post-war traumatic depression degrees and their urge to choose the "right" candidate who can improve the chaotic situation. Overall, two primary methods were used to prove this statement: secondary research and social media content analysis. The secondary research includes books, articles, and official websites where valuable information, surveys, and studies support and prove the credibility of the arguments brought throughout the research. The social media content analysis is based on studying all sorts of news, posts, and announcements

produced by the candidates. This analysis is directed to show the structure and the approach each candidate took during their campaign.

The Capstone Project is divided into three main body sections: "Psychological Analysis of the Traumatized Armenian Nation," based on secondary research; "2021 Electoral Process's Discourse Analysis," based on both secondary research and social media content analysis; and "Media Analysis: Quantitative and Qualitative Research" which is based on again secondary research. For the Psychological Analysis part, six secondary sources were used to show the psychological well-being of the Armenians in the 2021 elections. The research-based analysis brought sources to show how the 44-day war results generated depression in the public, which directly carried elements of fear and anxiety connected with past events of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Further, the analysis and the secondary sources aimed to show how the fear generated in 2020 was negatively reflected in the 2021 political election, causing people to make emotional decisions solely based on their individual war experiences. The analysis of this part started by bringing the historical background of Armenia's national traumatic experience in modern days by highlighting the Armenian Genocide and its negative influence on future generations. The secondary source, called "The Armenian Genocide and The Transgenerational Cultural Trauma," brings the notion that, indeed, genocidal experience is transferring from one generation to another, maintaining the sequence of depression in generations. The source was used to highlight that, till today, there are elements of fear and anxiety connected to genocide and the ones who prepared it. The analysis aimed to show how the fear of Turks in 1915 came to modern discourse in 2020. In this circumstance, the article called "Turkey and 'Turks' in Postwar Armenia: Anxieties, Meanings, and Politics After the 2020 Karabakh War" is used to show the interconnectedness of the involvement of Turks and post-war depression in the Armenian public.

These two secondary sources were valuable pieces for the analysis and supported the arguments and statements in the psychological analysis part. Furthermore, sources such as "The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict," "Bilateral Relations," and "Azerbaijan's 'Ethnic Hatred' Theme Park Draws Ire, Imperils Reconciliation" were used as fact-checking sources to bring valuable information about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and to show how these historical events affected peoples emotional well being. The last secondary source used in the psychological analysis part was "The Immediate Mental Health Effects of the 2020 Artsakh War on Armenians: A Cross-Sectional Study," which was used to support the notion that, indeed, there was depression in the country and different war experiences caused different degrees of emotional states in public, which immensely impacted their decisions in the 2021 elections. As a result, the secondary sources with the primary psychological analysis part supported the idea of people being traumatised by past events, which in turn caused extreme polarisation in elections. Moving on to the second part of the analysis, which is Media Discursive Analysis, the method of social media content research and analysis was used to show how, in the 2021 elections, different forms of content produced by candidates affected an already depressed population and led the public to become more polarized. In this part of the analysis, both secondary sources and social media content were researched and studied to explain how candidates used different forms of manipulative, persuasive, and other forms of content to influence the public. The essence of the produced content was thoroughly analyzed by bringing direct quotes from their speeches, which showed what type of media strategy they used, how many negative or positive elements were present in the content, and finally, how all these affected the public. As each candidate had immediate goals, these were separately studied and identified, such as gaining public trust, underestimating the opposite candidates, and manipulating the public for their own interest. Then the examination

showed how each goal upheld different strategies, and all these strategies were introduced one by one, bringing real-based examples and secondary sources to support the research. As a result, this part of the analysis holds direct examples from social media content aligned with secondary sources to show the content's quality and the way it impacted people's decisions and brought more polarization in public. The last body part of the Captone Project was quantitative and qualitative research, which was done to estimate the overall media and people's trust in and usage of it. For this part of the analysis, different secondary sources and survey-based research were gathered, which, first, in the quantitative part, showed how often people used media. The essence of the sources used in the research was providing data and numbers, for example, the secondary source DataReportal gave valuable data on how many accessed the internet in 2021 and what they searched and used for social media, and which specific social media the public preferred the most. Other sources used in this research, such as the Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, conducted a massive survey where people of different genders, ages, and economic and educational backgrounds in Armenia participated, giving valuable data on the reasons for using social media and other media platforms in the 2021 elections. The overall results of the analysis show that in the 2021 Armenian electoral process, there was a disharmony of media trust and media consumption, as people distrusted media, especially social networks, but consumed information exactly from there. Based on qualitative research findings, it was concluded that the disharmony of media trust and immense consumption of social media adversely affected people's media perception by impacting their behavior and choices. Moving on, the qualitative research of the analysis again brought secondary sources and survey-based resources to estimate the quality of the content produced on different social media platforms, including social media, news websites, and traditional media. This part aimed to show how

media quality impacted people and their further steps in the electoral process by examining media restrictions and mis/disinformation. Sources such as the Freedom of Information Center brought valuable data on how the disseminators of disinformation in the Armenian 2021 electoral process were based on fake or misleading content. The method of using secondary sources helped identify the low-quality content produced in 2021, which impacted people's perceptions and artificially deepened the existing polarisation.

As a result, it can be estimated that both methods used in this research, secondary sources and media content analysis, were the basis of the Capstone Project, which together brought strong and valid information, data, and surveys to support the central thesis.

#### **IV. Psychological Analysis of the Traumatized Armenian Nation**

##### **4.1 Historical Background: Trauma on the Armenian Genes stemming from 1915**

The concept of the struggle for survival in Armenian public discourse has deeper roots and can be explained through the most traumatic experience that Armenians faced merely a decade ago in the 20th century. From 1915 to 1918, the evil process of genocide started when the authorities of Turkey called the Young Turks, under the leadership of Talaat Pasha, started massacres of Armenians when over the period, 1.5 million Armenian men, women, and children were killed, and thousands of people escaped their homeland, Western Armenia, to save their lives. The goal of genocide was to get rid of Armenians from Western Armenia and to "destroy, in whole, all Armenians, by killing members of the group and causing serious bodily harm, including mental harm." (Babakhanyan, p.1, 2019) The genocide was organized and proceeded in several phases;

the first phase was arresting, deporting, and killing leaders, intellectuals, and powerful Armenians on April 24, 1915. The second phase was gathering all Armenian men, starting from age 18, to the Turkish army, where all were tortured and killed to get rid of the physical strength of the nation. The final phase was deporting Armenian women, children, and the elderly to deserts to torture, harass, and kill them. The three phases of massacres and extreme tortures not only left massive physical, psychological, and biological-reproductive harm to Armenians living in 1915, but also these were transferred to future generations.

#### **4.2 The Codification of Trauma in Genes and Armenians as Inheritors of Trauma**

As the genocidal agenda was provided above, it could be concluded that the Young Turks had a very well-planned agenda of killing Armenians, which started by abolishing Armenians from the core of the simplest structure of human needs: families.

- The first deepest trauma, according to the agenda of genocide, which is codified in Armenian genes, is the separation of men from their wives and children, which left Armenian women and children vulnerable and defenseless.
- The second trauma codified in Armenian genes is deportation and leaving behind the homeland and belongings.
- The third trauma codified in Armenian genes is seeing the torture and death of family members.
- The final trauma codified in Armenian genes is an escape to anywhere on the planet for survival, with the realization of never reuniting with a family and homeland ever again.

Thousands of people escaped and survived the genocide, each having their own pain, loss, and trauma, and reaction to the event differently. Some survivors "lived to tell their stories, and these

stories have been passed on from one generation to the next," some decided to stay silent, not to transfer the shameful experience; however, the silence had a bigger context of darkness and tragedy, so "not only was the silence transferred, but also the trauma." (Babakhanyan, p.5, 2019) The tragic stories and survival struggles are tattooed in Armenian genes; these are burdens that each Armenian carries to this day, and each reacts and proceeds differently.

### **4.3 Turks and Turkey: The way Turkey and the Ethnonym Turk are Codified in Armenians' Genes**

Armenia's association with Turkey and Turks is limited in the context of the taboo genocide topic, where Turks are immoral evils, and Armenians are immortal victims. One hundred and ten years passed after the Armenian genocide; however, nothing has changed in the attitude and relations of Armenians towards Turks. Even though Armenia and Turkey are neighbors, Armenians removed Turkey and Turks from the modern-day context and identified them as a historical event, as after 1915, there was no immediate contact between Armenia and Turkey. Armenia and Turkey banned travel and trade and refused to establish diplomatic relations with each other, meaning that the relations were frozen for a very long time. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RA, 2025) The article "Turkey and 'Turks' in Postwar Armenia: Anxieties, Meanings, and Politics After the 2020 Karabakh War" explains that there is a correlation between people's physical movement and their sense of space, meaning that movement has been noted as a factor that generates spatial or regional awareness. (Papazian, 2023) As a result, it could be concluded that Turkey and Turks, from Armenians' understanding, were stuck in a timeline of history, specifically in 1915, as immoral evils, and after all, relations were frozen, meaning Armenians' mindset also was frozen in the context of genocide.

#### **4.4 Turkey's Comeback Into Armenian Discourse**

##### **Bringing Awareness from Past (1915) to Present (2020-2021)**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia and Azerbaijan had a conflict over the territory called Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), which led both countries to fight for years over the land. The conflict started "three years before Armenia and Azerbaijan gained independence and remains unresolved after more than thirty years." (Askerov, p.55, 2020) The first war ended in 1994 with the victory of Armenia, however, it did not become part of Armenia, but Nagorno-Karabakh or Artsakh became an independent area only recognised by Armenia. Starting from 1994 to 2020, Armenians had various clashes and two major wars with Azerbaijan, but it is essential to note that over these years, Armenia fought specifically with Azerbaijan and not with Turkey.

The situation changed in the 2020 Karabakh War when Azerbaijan, in a full-scale range with the help of Turkish military, financial, and human resources, attacked Armenia, bringing Turkey and 'the Turk' closer to Armenia again. (Papazian, 2023) Turkey, after a long 105-year gap, again appeared at the center of attention with similar intentions -- vanishing Armenians from their homeland. As a result, it can be said that a decade passed, but the style of the Turks had not changed, as their goal was to have territorial advantages while also mocking, belittling, and psychologically torturing the whole nation. After winning the war, "Turkey's president attended the victory parade in Baku on December 10, 2020, alongside his Azerbaijani counterpart." (Papazian, 2023) This directly shows that the victory and the territorial advantage was not only Azerbaijani, but Turkey had an immediate benefit and impact on it as it supported and encouraged the whole war situation, which only caused chaos in the entire Caucasus region.

Aside from this, a park was opened exhibiting features of dozens of "Armenian tanks, trucks, and other heavy military equipment captured during the 44-day war period, along with soldier mannequins," which were aimed to mock and depict Armenian soldiers as "freakish" as possible. (Hauer, 2021) This was another humiliating act by the winners, which was directed not only to highlight their victory but also to represent Armenians internationally as a fragile, vulnerable, and scared nation. Moving on after the war on December 12, 2022, the Azerbaijani government created a humanitarian crisis for the ethnic Armenians by blockading the area and "severely restricting the freedom of movement of goods and all remaining 120,000 Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh," and then after nine months of blockade allowing them to flee the area (Center of Truth and Justice, p.6, 2023) It can be concluded that this was another inhumane act from winners which intended to traumatize the nation both physically by restricting food and hygiene to enter the territory of Nagorno Karabakh and psychologically for isolating the area and keeping the population mainly consisting of women children and elderly in fear of attack. All these experiences together were highly traumatic to a nation that went through genocide, and after a decade, the same enemy attacked with similar intentions to humiliate, discriminate, and take the homeland from Armenians. The past tragic experiences with Turkey/ Turks and the realization of the upcoming threats from historical enemies forced the nation to bring awareness and the concept of the "struggle for survival" from 1915 to 2020 and 2021 context.

#### **4.5 The 2021 Elections and People's Differing Post-War Stress Degrees**

After the deadly war, the order in the country turned chaotic as the public raised huge waves of complaints, thus leading the government to hold snap elections. The candidate's campaign started in April, and on the 20th of June 2021, citizens of Armenia participated in the

parliamentary snap elections and chose their preferred candidate. (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2021)

The elections were directly connected to the 44-day war, which in turn shows that people during the elections were in a post-war traumatic state when their decisions were highly based on emotions and varying degrees of war experiences. A study was done to quantify post-war depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder levels among the Armenian population after the 44-day war. The study showed that "all participants from Artsakh 100%, and 89.2% from Armenia were directly exposed to the war," from which various people were affected differently. (Movsisyan, 2022) The study identified that, indeed, different experiences shaped different degrees of trauma, such as being physically injured from war, loved one's participation, injury, death, loss of home, and loss of finances. As a result, it can be estimated that people got different degrees of trauma based on their varying experiences, and the level of trauma even increased because Turkey was involved in the war. This all together caused different kinds of perceptions among the people, and each had their own shaped understanding of which candidate could solve the problem. The directions of people's perceptions in this struggle for survival were divided into two main streams; one idea was that Nikol Pashinyan was a weak leader and couldn't control the situation, and could even make it worse. Pashinyan's plan was to settle diplomatic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, which some Armenians saw as a threat to Armenia. In one of his speeches, Pashinyan said: "We want to normalize relations with Turkey, but we would like to ask ... Turkey and Azerbaijan...", whether they "Are willing to destroy Armenia or not? Are they willing to continue with the genocide of the Armenian people and bring it to completion, or not?" (Papazian, 2023) This speech brought vulnerability to some parts of the public, as there was a perception that Armenia asks for diplomatic relations in a case when Turkey did not even accept the Armenian Genocide as a historical fact. In this circumstance,

people believed that former president Robert Kocharyan was an experienced person who could control the situation instead of establishing diplomatic relations with the enemy; he would reestablish long-existing boundaries of cold relations between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. The second perception was that Nikol Pashinyan was actually a diplomat, and the idea of establishing relations would put an end to the war, which would benefit Armenia. In this circumstance, people believed that Robert Kocharyan's involvement, whom most people identified as a corrupt leader, would cause a problem, as the clashes would continue because of his patriotic and nationalistic views. As a result, it can be assessed that both directions that the public held carried Turkey's component, and both directions were based on post-traumatic experiences and fear towards Turkey, and while one part thought diplomatic relations were good, the others thought it could be the end of Armenia. This whole process in its turn made the public become polarised, one part supporting Nikol Pashinyan and another part Robert Kocharyan, all with an aim to choose the "right candidate" who will "save the nation."

## **V. 2021 Electoral Process's Discourse Analysis: Media as a Platform in the 2021 Elections to Gain the Trust of the Post-War Traumatized Public**

### **5.1 Regaining Public Trust**

In Armenia's political discourse, one goal for each candidate was to rebuild a strong and ideal political character to gain the public's trust. As the representation of character was more influential than the political agenda, both Robert Kocharyan and Nikol Pashinyan chose media as a tool to re-establish their positive character in the public eye. In this process, both of them chose two main ways: the accusation of the opposites and creating new symbols and narratives to regain the public's trust.

The article "Revolution, Covid-19, and War in Armenia: Impacts on Various Forms of Trust" raises the idea that, indeed, trust is one of the main tools that can influence the public to act in a certain way. The authors give definitions of what political trust, mistrust, and distrust are by defining the first as "loyalty, commitment," the second one as "critical attitude, caution," and the third one as "alienation, cynicism, and contempt." (Paturyan, p.6, 2024) In the Armenian 2021 election discourse, most of the public was in a state of post-war traumatic depression, and the majority had the urge to choose the right path (candidate) to survive. However, different social groups behaved differently, and while some continued to trust with loyalty and commitment to a specific candidate or institution, others started to express mistrust like a critical attitude, and even some social classes started to distrust, meaning they became alienated from all social institutions and political candidates. Among different state and social institutions, the media was one of the leading ones which lost its credibility in the public eye. It is estimated that "the overall polarized and toxic post-war public discourse might have contributed to the decline of public trust in the media," from 29% in 2019 to 10% in 2021. (Paturyan, p.16, 2024) However, the media, as a social institution, includes and reaches out to almost all social classes, and indeed, is a huge setting that ensures "sufficient access to the voters to inform those voters where the candidate stands on the issues." (Dalager, p.487, 1996) Accordingly, in the 2021 political elections, to gain the trust of the public, both candidates decided to use media, which would guarantee that their message would reach a wide range of audiences, including different social classes with different post-war experiences. Pashinyan and Kocharyan used overwhelming amounts of campaign messages, which greatly impacted people's behavior. The article "Voters, Issues, and Elections: Are the Candidates' Messages Getting Through?" brings the "cognitive miser" model, which suggests that when an individual's information processing system is

overtaxed, errors and biases will occur. In response to these conclusions, political psychologists found that "one of the simplest ways for voters to cope with an ambiguous political environment is by inferring the missing or unclear information with their best guess as to what the information should be." (Dalager, p.488, 1996) The political campaign in Armenian media discourse generated the same situation by overfeeding the public with different sorts of information, which caused biases in public perception, which in turn caused the public to make their own perceptions of what the information means. This situation brought public disorder, generating different public perceptions and different degrees of trust/mistrust/distrust in different social classes, and people having diverse post-war experiences started to perceive the produced information based on their guesses. Indeed, the primary goal of both candidates was to regain public trust by using different campaign messages structured based on symbolism, narratives, and accusations of the opposites; however, these brought more bias in public perception due to the post-war experience, which in turn caused public polarization.

### **Regaining public trust: the usage of symbols, narratives, and accusations of opposing candidates to regain public trust**

#### **5.1.1 The Usage of Narratives to Regain Public Trust**

Robert Kocharyan, in his meeting in Syunik, had a conversation with people and accused Nikol Pashinyan. The exact part of the accusation was cut and posted on his Facebook page. In his speech, he said, "Unfortunately, in our country, the idea of a great homeland has been put under question in the last few years. This is because they [Pashinyan and his team] have consistently begun to destroy state institutions." (Kocharyan, 2021) In the first place, he accuses Pashinyan of destroying state institutions, intending to weaken the country. By stating this, he points out that Pashinyan's weak leadership leads people to question the idea of the Great

Homeland of Armenia. Then, Kocharyan explains, "Patriotism has become a sign of underdevelopment for them, but a patriot is a modern person, and a person can be both modern and patriotic." Making people citizens of the world, especially Armenians, is very problematic because we have a large diaspora and a large infrastructure for emigration." (Kocharyan, 2021)

Kocharyan brings the possible negative results, stating that Pashinyan's propaganda is not patriotic but more cosmopolitan, which is very dangerous for Armenia, as this preaching may cause emigration. While accusing Pashinyan of not being patriotic, Kocharyan creates a strong symbolic patriotic character who, after being elected, will become the next "hero" of Armenia. As proof of his patriotic nature, he brings a solution to this dangerous anti-patriotic propaganda by saying, "First of all, we need to restore what has been destroyed over the past three years and make programmatic changes like strengthening the attitude towards the church." (Kocharyan, 2021)

One reason Kocharyan brings this accusation is based on Pashinyan's and the church's negative relationship. The church in Armenia always played an important and strengthening role; however, Pashinyan made very harsh announcements about the clergy members. Due to this, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin via its Facebook page answered Pashinyan's insults about corrupt clergymen and said these were "unfair accusations against the Armenian Church," and these may become a big threat to the national-spiritual values in Armenia. (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 2021)

By referring to the church and bringing it as an example of how Pashinyan destroys the state, Kocharyan aims to show how his leadership will restore its importance and continue to build stronger nationalistic propaganda intended to strengthen Armenia. At the end of his speech, Kocharyan adds that in his meeting in church with His Holiness Garegin, they had a conversation when His Holiness mentioned that "the state, citizen, and faith are one and always interconnected force," showing the importance of the support and faith from state and people to

church and vice versa. The symbolism and path that Kocharyan chose to gain public trust were quite promising for some people, as these values, such as patriotism and the church, were, for centuries, the primary force behind Armenia's survival.

In the path of rebuilding his reputation, there was another great threat to Kocharyan's character, which was his label as an oligarch. The article "Power, Family and Business: Practices of Oligarchic Economy in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Armenia (Before 2018)" brings the notion that from the start of gaining independence till the Velvet Revolution, Armenia's economy functioned based on family businesses held by oligarchs. These oligarchs were part of Armenia's political system, and they "illegally leach off the state budget and infrastructures since Armenia ushered in the post-socialist capitalism era." (Antonyan, 2023) These illegal actions led the public to perceive Armenia's previous leader, Robert Kocharyan, and his team as a corrupt, illegal, and non-democratic government. Robert Kocharyan's background and previously generated mistrust and distrust towards him were quite a big force, which forced the public to associate him with an "oligarchic economy and falsified democracy." (Antonyan, 2023) To get rid of this kind of labeling, Robert Kocharyan, on May 18, 2021, made an announcement on his Facebook and X pages that he had decided to leave "Sistema" JSFC, which is one of the largest Russian companies. In the announcement, it was written, "From now on, President Kocharyan will focus his attention and efforts on overcoming the challenges facing Armenia and resolving the political agenda issues." (Kocharyan, 2021) This announcement was a message to the public to make an impression that Kocharyan is no longer interested in business and accumulating more money; instead, he will fully concentrate on Armenia and find ways of resolving the big issues. According to the statement, "submitted as of May 1, Kocharyan is an independent director in Sistema JSFC with an approximate income of \$ 199,300." (Chilingaryan, 2021) The decision that

Kocharyan made minimized his yearly worth by 200,000 dollars, yet he gained the trust of some people via his actions.

### **5.1.2 The Usage of Symbols to Regain Public Trust**

Pashinyan mostly created and used symbols to attract the public's trust. In the 2021 elections, "Pashinyan escalated his rhetoric regarding the "steel mandate," brandishing a hammer during each of his campaign rallies." (Avedian, 2021) On June 13, 2021, Pashinyan met with people in the Kotayk region, the town of Yeghvard, and from there, he did a Facebook livestream where he got a hammer as a present from one of his supporters. In his speech, he said, "I want us to perceive this hammer as a symbol that is, first and foremost, a constructive symbol, but yes, it is steel with which we must establish a dictatorship of law and justice." (Pashinyan, 2021) While preaching democracy and tolerance in the 2018 Velvet Revolution and making it the core symbolism of his rhetoric, Pashinyan in 2021 changed the velvet mandate with the steel mandate, highlighting strictness or, as he says, "dictatorship" in law and justice. The same day, he did another Facebook livestream from the town of Nor Geghi, where he again brandished his hammer. In the meeting, he said, "The hammer is a very accurate expression of the steel mandate because, with it, you can remove those who need to be removed, you can nail those who need to be nailed, you can build where you need to build, and you can destroy where you need to destroy." (Pashinyan, 2021) In his speech, there are a number of violent statements that point to the possibility of dictatorial rule that he plans to establish in Armenia. The symbolism of his new rhetoric was quite dangerous as it signified violent strength, as the hammer was in his and his supporters' hands, and whoever was against it within the country could be destroyed. Human Rights defender Armen Tatoyan referred to this exchange of velvet mandate to steel mandate in his Facebook post by saying, "This does not only create division lines in the society but, in

whatever way it is interpreted, it is associated with violence and even revenge, bringing with it risks of its transformation from rhetoric into reality." (Tatoyan, 2021) Pashinyan's new symbolism was indeed violent; however, this was a very well-planned manipulation to attract the public, as only one year passed after the 2020 deadly war, and Armenia both physically and mentally felt weak and desired something robust, which in this case was the steel mandate.

### **5.1.3 Accusations of Opposing Candidates to Regain Public Trust**

Nikol Pashinyan similarly used the accusation method to look like a better political leader than Kocharyan. In his speech in Syunik, he said, "On June 20, the honest citizens of the Republic of Armenia will give an answer to the crook who beat and killed Dashnak member Poghos Poghosyan in the toilet." (Pashinyan, 2021) This criminal case happened on September 25, 2001; Poghos Poghosyan, a political figure, had earlier expressed negative feelings towards Kocharyan and, once seeing him in one of the cafes in Yerevan, disrespectfully greeted the president by saying, "Privet Rob!" (Hi Rob). After all, Kocharyan's bodyguard invited him into the bathroom, where Poghosyan was brutally beaten to death. For this criminal action, "Aghmal Harutiunian, the only one of Kocharian's bodyguards to be charged with a crime, was accused of murder; however, he received the minimum legal penalty after a conviction of manslaughter." (Bravo, 2006) By constantly repeating the example to the public, Pashinyan aims to condemn Kocharyan, show his illegal actions, and remind the public of his negative political face.

In this process of accusation, Pashinyan pointed out his "non-criminal, pro-democratic nature" by using his old symbolic character left from 2018 impressions and new symbolic narratives to attract the public and gain their trust. In almost all Facebook posts, Pashinyan talks about how he will destroy oligarchs, making him analogous to the legendary hero from English folklore, Robin Hood. Pashinyan, indeed starting in 2018, based "his political capital by applying

the reverse Robin Hood complex," making his slogan take from the corrupt rich and give it back to the people." (Kopalyan, 2018) In 2021 discourse, he is using the same metaphoric concept which is obvious by his speeches like "we will break their [bank] accounts, destroy their firms and shove each of these criminal upstarts into holes on your behalf." (Pashinyan, 2021) This symbolism of Robin Hood and the accusation of Kocharyan being a criminal are interconnected forces in Pashinyan's speeches, as these two together re-establish his character and try to attract the public's trust one more time.

## **5.2 Hate and Violent Speech in Armenian Political Discourse**

In the process of elections, hate and violent speeches became an inseparable part of candidate's campaign messages, announcements, and news, which was radiated then in all over social media platforms, encouraging people to participate and support their preferred candidate's violent statements, which eventually brought hatred among people, resulting in deepening public polarization and even causing a possibility of civil war.

The article "Dignity and Speech: The Regulations of Hate Speech in the Democracy States," states that free speech is essential for maintaining democracy as it facilitates the exchange of diverse opinions, including diverse input into political decision-making. (Tseis, p. 497, 2009) Armenia, as a democratic state, ensures by Article 42 of its constitution that everyone has the right to express his or her opinion freely. The constitution states that "This right shall include freedom to hold own opinion, as well as to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas through any media, without the interference of state or local self-government bodies and regardless of state frontiers." (Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, 2025) This right, by its essence, is a reincarnation of democracy, encouraging people to act, think, and express themselves freely in accordance with their beliefs and understandings. However, there is an

illusional tiny line between this democratic right and an undemocratic act called hate and violent speech. While people may freely express their opinions, those can include offensive announcements, harassment, threats, and many more, which could be direct or indirect threats to another person's life or dignity. For this reason, "In combating the threat, states committed to free speech may adopt laws that prevent the dangerous dissemination of messages without interfering with legitimate, although sometimes offensive, discourse." (Tseis, p. 497, 2009) The Armenian constitution, under the same article 42, which allows freedom of expression, limits it by stating, "Freedom of expression of opinion may be restricted only by law, for the purpose of state security, protecting public order, health and morals or the honor and good reputation of others and other basic rights and freedoms thereof." (Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, 2025) While having a direct and concrete law regarding free speech, the Armenian political discourse in the 2021 electoral process misused the right of free speech by turning it into hate and violent speeches. Terzyan, in the article "Armenia in the Aftermath of the War: Between Changing Landscapes and Unchanging Problems," states that hate speech and manipulating news content on social media became one of the biggest challenges as pro-government and opposition politicians have regularly accused each other of running troll factories to bully and discredit political rivals. (Terzyan, p.6, 2024) Each candidate, by designating the opponent, tried to increase their own reputation and establish closer interpersonal connections with their audience. As a result, the culture of hate and violent speeches was brought up by exactly the candidates and other state institutions, which was another factor for the post-war traumatized public to be affected and start to integrate it not only in the electoral process but also in everyday speech. This hate speech culture had a direct impact on people's behavior, which resulted in the public becoming polarised. The article "Exposure to hate speech deteriorates neurocognitive

mechanisms of the ability to understand others' pain" based its study on experiments and brought up an interesting hypothesis that "exposure to hate speech leads to decreased activity in the pain matrix and/or ToM (Theory of Mind) network in response to others' pain or suffering, regardless of their group membership." (Pluta, 2023) The findings of this article show that hate speech can dull one's empathy and emotional responses to others' emotional suffering. In the Armenian 2021 elections, there were different social groups with different degrees of post-war experiences, which already brought division in the public; in addition to this, hate speech implemented by different social groups toward each other alienated people's emotional responses toward each other's sufferings. Accordingly, the usage of hate speech by candidates had a direct impact on people's behavior, not only toward political candidates but also toward different social groups. By implementing hate speech, people's empathy towards other social classes with different degrees of post-war depression decreased. Consequently, this whole process brought more polarisation to the public.

### **Hate Speech and Violent Speech: Threats and attacks on the reputation and dignity of the opposing candidate to trigger the post-war traumatized public to react**

#### **5.2.1 Threats and Attacks on Reputation and Dignity**

At Syunik region city, Goris, Pashinyan, in his speech, said, "And with the steel mandate you have given us, we will hammer out those rusty nails from many places, including here, and the outliers in various municipalities, because Syunik is not a homeland for them but a customs terminal, a source of replenishment to fill their bank accounts, a means to fill their accounts at the expense of the people, and with this mandate we will break their bank accounts, destroy their

firms and shove each of these criminal upstarts into holes on your behalf." (Pashinyan, 2021) In this one long sentence, there are a number of offensive and violent statements which are specifically directed toward former political leaders of Armenia. The Armenian Constitution, under Article 42, guarantees the right to freedom of expression; however, "It also allows for restrictions on this right in certain circumstances, such as for the protection of the good reputation of others." (Bakalis, p.9, 2020) Pashinyan's speech was a threat to Kocharyan's reputation and dignity, which in this specific case was not based on solid evidence. Having no solid evidence and saying, "Syunik is not a homeland for them," is an extreme threat to the former Armenian President's reputation, which indeed can be considered an illegal speech act. This violent speech also points out that whenever Pashinyan gets back into his position, he will destroy Kocharyan, the elite, and their property. However, the goal of elections is not to wage a vendetta but to solve the various problems that Armenia faces. Human Rights defender Arman Tatoyan, on May 5, 2021, published an announcement on Facebook and on the official website of Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, saying, "Since the country is in a state of the electoral process, these statements may be conceived as threats by the person exercising the mandate derived from the highest state status (high-ranking official) against their opponents, which is unacceptable, taking into consideration their political rights." (Tatoyan, 2021) As a result, legally, it is unacceptable to use this kind of violent rhetoric, especially from high-ranking political figures, as it might generate further hatred in the public. Arman Tatoyan also mentioned in his announcement that this kind of speech "contributes to the increase in the political and public polarization and undermines the prospect of restoring solidarity in the country." (Tatoyan, 2021)

### 5.2.2 Encouraging Violence by the Calls of Physical Confrontation

While being under the violent rhetorical attack of the prime minister, Robert Kocharyan also used the same violent tactics towards him. On June 5, 2021, on his Facebook, Robert Kocharyan posted a short video where he rejected the Pashinyan's invitation to participate in a political debate and said, "As for the debate, I didn't know about it, I didn't follow what they said, I didn't have the time or the desire for it. I don't know; we didn't have that tradition, but in Russian, they say duel. I'm ready to invite you to it with any type of weapon." (Kocharyan, 2021) In this short video, Kocharyan sends a violent message and invites Pashinyan to a duel, which is a contest between two people with weapons, and the one who wins gets the honor. This violent statement, which was made in the meeting with people, was appreciated by applause, accordingly showing that people do support their candidate's violent announcement and are ready to participate in it. To this harsh message, Pashinyan responded, "I will destroy you with my words, my heart, my mind, and the people's support. Say the date and place, take whatever weapon you want, and I will come with the people, and we will slaughter you in a political sense." (Pashinyan, 2021) This was a threat to the whole public, as Pashinyan changed the concept of the duel, the war between two people, to the concept of civil war by stating that he would come with the people. According to the Armenian Criminal Code, article 226.2 prohibits calling the public for violence against a person or group of persons based on political or other views, including such acts as publicly justifying or advocating such violence. (Bakalis, p. 9, 2020) As a result, both Kocharyan's and Pashinyan's responses were illegal and contradicted the Armenian Constitution by calling each other or the public to violent acts, especially in circumstances when Armenia had just gone through a deadly war. After the 2020 war, Armenia's privacy and security decreased, as "When the military servicemen and volunteers returned to

Armenia in November, the situation was chaotic, the control at checkpoints to collect weapons was not strong." (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2021) In addition to this, all social media platforms were filled with these kinds of hate and violent speeches, and the possibility of civil war was very high. Freedom of Information Center, in the research "The Mapping of the Media in Armenia in the Context of the Flight Against Dis/Misinformation," brings up the fact that from the 2020-2021 Armenian political elections, hate speech in media increased enough that international institutions such as "NSS arrested Facebook account users on the grounds of inciting violence, spreading hate speech or threatening national security." (Freedom of Information Center, P.26, 2021) The interference of international organizations in restricting hate speech shows that the government of the Republic of Armenia failed to keep the constitutional law under 42, which limits hate and violent speech in free speech. The failure mainly came from the fact that Pashinyan, Kocharyan, and other major political parties were acting against the state's legislative rules by implementing hate and violent statements themselves instead of restricting the public from doing so. In a democracy, "When harassing expression is disguised as political expression, it adds nothing to democratic debate," meaning that the hate speech culture would only bring degrading and dangerous consequences. (Tseis, p.201, 2009) The First President of the Republic of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan, in his Facebook announcement, said: "The internal political conflict will not only not stop, but will also intensify the conflict and the government will not have the opportunity to deal, first of all, with security issues." (Ter-Petrosyan, 2021) This announcement shows his concern about civil war, which might have occurred because of the harsh and violent opposition that candidates showed during the election process.

### 5.3 Categorization and the Usage of Emotional Manipulation

#### **Categorizing people based on their political choices and using emotional manipulation**

Each candidate used social media to produce content that would not only increase the number of their followers but also strengthen the relationship with their current followers. In each and every announcement, speech, or post, both Nikol Pashinyan and Robert Kocharyan referred to their audience, and while Kocharyan categorized people based on their political choices, Pashinyan used emotional manipulation. These tactics again had a huge impact on the post-war traumatized public, and people started to become polarized in response to their candidate's categorizations and manipulative statements.

#### **Categorization of People**

Chapter four of the book "Advances in Experimental Social Psychology" is named Political Ideology and Social Categorization, and it discusses the idea that people mentally organize the world into categories, including themselves and the people around them. The chapter says, "Researchers set the term social categorization to describe various forms of judgments in which perceivers apply a category label (e.g., Black, Muslim, straight) to a target person." (Stern, 2022) Typically, general social categorization is the automatic human response to surroundings, while political categorization is mainly based on analytical human comparison of others with oneself. The article "Reframing Social Categorization as *Latent Structure Learning for Understanding Political Behaviour*" brings the notion that in political categorization, "we could compare our own social identities against those of the target person to infer similarity to the target, whether through direct or implied means." (Lau,2021) Even though political categorization may have a good impact on political discourse by helping individuals to

find like-minded people, this could also create radical divisions in public between people who differ from each other in their political beliefs. The article "On Membership Categorization: 'Us,' 'Them' and 'Doing Violence' in Political Discourse" argues that political figures do the 'us/' them' categorizations in such a way as to set a huge division between each other. (Leudar, 2004) In Armenian political discourse, the implementation of "us/them" was implemented by candidates who mainly excluded, under-evaluated, and even offended the opposite group, which in one way can be named as a discriminating person for their political beliefs. As discrimination comes into the political discourse, it immediately violates the law set by the Armenian Constitution under Article 25, which states that people cannot be discriminated based on their political or other views. As a result of this observation, a conclusion can be made that ideological political categorization is somehow a good tool for differentiating people, for example, liberals from democrats in U.S. discourse; however, in Armenian discourse, as there are no core political, ideological differences, people are categorized based on their choices, which were mainly formed based on their war experiences. This kind of categorization in political discourse creates artificial divisions in the public by creating an illusion that people drastically differ by their mindset, but these divisions come from their differing war experiences, which shape their beliefs toward certain candidates.

### **Emotional Manipulation**

The article "The Political Psychology of Electoral Suppression: Institutional Manipulation, Emotion, and Mobilization" explains that the manipulation in electoral processes is directly correlated with people's immediate emotional responses to specific events or occasions. The article states, "Electoral manipulation is the intentional act of preventing eligible citizens from voting or skewing the results of their participation in ways that affect the election's

outcome." (Izzat, p.127, 2023) This means that the manipulation by the candidate is used on the public with the aim of having the desired election outcome. The manipulation process, indeed, is a complex process that includes various forms of communication methods and tactics to grasp public attention and interest. The article "The Communicative Strategies and Tactics of Verbal Manipulation in Political Discourse" states that the methods of speech influence can surpass the level of interpersonal connection and become the most significant tools for influencing and regulating public opinion and behavior. (Kaldybekova, 2022) The author highlights that all words, lexical units, and even the structure of sentences are essential in influencing people's emotions and shaping opinions. In the 2021 electoral discourse, the usage of emotional manipulation, as expected, generated different emotional responses in various groups, and the leading emotional state in the post-war public was fear and anger. Experiments on socio-political reactions of people showed that one possible reason for election participation is that people experienced anger and fear concurrently, and both emotions evoked some involvement. (Izzat, 2023) In the 2021 election, candidates structured manipulative statements in a way that caused fear in the public of living through war again and anger at losing in the war as previously. The study brought up by Izzat challenges the notion that emotions are mere byproducts of rational cost-benefit calculations in political engagement; instead, emotions play a central role in determining participation or non-participation. (Izzat, 2023) Armenians in the 2021 elections had different post-war experiences and, being under different emotional states, were affected by the manipulation to the extent that they acted according to their emotions rather than rational calculation. Emotion-based decisions led to extreme behavioral acts in public, affecting people's behavior toward each other's choices, which in turn caused social divisions.

### 5.3.1 Categorizing People Based on Their Political Choices

In his Facebook video, where Robert Kocharyan had a meeting with people on June 2, 2021, one of his followers asks Kocharyan about how he will "treat Nikolism," referring to people who follow Nikol Pashinyan. Robert Kocharyan answers his follower's questions by saying, "There are different ways to treat the disease. I'm not a doctor, but we all know that now they either do surgery or vaccinate. I think the right thing to do is to vaccinate because we can't operate on 20 percent of our people. This means educating and engaging in the right propaganda is the best path." (Kocharyan, 2021) The start of Kocharyan's answer shows that he confirms his follower's statement that Nikolism exists and it is a disease that they should get rid of by "vaccinating" people. Then he adds that vaccination means educating and engaging people in "right" propaganda meaning that the followers of Pashinyan are not properly educated to be engaged in "right" propaganda which will lead them and the country to failure. After this harsh description, he continues, "Whether we accept it or not, whether we like it or not, they are part of our society, and I don't consider them guilty; on the contrary, they are the ones who are the victims of all this." With this transition, Kocharyan brings the concept of "victim" to point that the ones who get the illness of Nikolism aren't guilty, but these people are victims because, he adds "The real culprit is the politician who preaches hatred inside the society, and for people who have not achieved anything in life or have problems and are under various social burdens, it is always easier to believe that their failures come from someone who robbed them." Kocharyan's main goal here is to put all the guilt on Pashinyan and his propaganda of convincing people that all their financial failures came from the former oligarchic system; however, aside from this, Kocharyan labels these people as "people who have not achieved anything in life," have problems" and "are under various social burdens." Article 29 of the Armenian Constitution

prohibits discrimination based on worldview, political or other views, property status, or other personal or social circumstances. (Bakalis, p. 9, 2020) If not directly, but in his speech, Kocharyan discriminates people from low social classes for having specific political views and supporting Nikol Pashinyan in the elections. This labeling can have various impacts on different social classes in Armenia, and each of them would interpret this differently, leading to opinion clashes. People from lower social classes would not be happy with statements like "people who have not achieved anything in life," which will drastically impact their decision to follow Pashinyan instead of following a person who underestimates them. On the contrary, people from higher social classes will agree with Kocharyan and strongly believe that people from the lower social class are less intelligent and haven't achieved anything in life, so their decision will, of course, damage the future of Armenia. As a result, referring to people and labeling them brought a huge wave of opinion clashes, which resulted in the polarisation of the public.

### **5.3.2 The Usage of Emotional Manipulation**

Pashinyan used another tactic, hidden but more manipulative, speeches, to solidify the mutual relationship between him and his followers. On June 13, 2021, Pashinyan met in the Kotayk region with people and did a live stream on Facebook where he said, "When you pick up this ballot on June 20, don't look at what names are formally and legally written on this ballot. On this ballot, number 3, the names of each of you, the names of your children, and the names of your children's futures are written." (Pashinyan, 2021) One of the core manipulations that Pashinyan used throughout his campaign was referring to people as the state's highest institution, who have the absolute right to make all the decisions. In his previous speeches during the 2018 Velvet Revolution in the center of Republic Square, he often said that all decisions about Armenia would be discussed with the people. The same manipulative rhetoric was performed in

2021 by attracting people with the statement, "In this ballot, it is written each of your names." However, these manipulative "pro-democratic" statements indeed do not correspond with reality, as one of the most important questions, which was the territory of Artsakh, was one day "secretly" recognized as part of Azerbaijan. After all, an announcement has sparked outrage across Armenia, Artsakh, and the diaspora, saying that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recognized Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan. (Avedian, 2023) This was a political territorial issue that upper bodies of the governmental system could solve, so Pashinyan, in other words, lied to the public only to get the position by making manipulative statements that all state decisions would be established after the public's approval. Saying to people in the 2021 elections, "We have returned the power we took from you back to you; now, you are the highest authority in Armenia and have the opportunity to make any decision that you wish," and later on, on 2023, in one day recognize Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan can be considered from some people as a betrayal to your own nation. Later on, Pashinyan justified himself by saying, "Azerbaijan has made it clear: if you do not recognize our territorial integrity, we will not recognize yours. Meaning, if you don't recognize that Azerbaijan is 86,600 square kilometers, then we don't recognize that Armenia is 29,800 square kilometers." (Avedian, 2023) From his announcement, it is apparent that Pashinyan is just a leader whose political character is based not on his professionalism in the political sphere but on his manipulative and poor justifications, via which he attracts public attention.

## VI. Media Analysis

### 6.1 Quantitative Research: Internet and Social Media Usage

DataReportal provides massive data on Armenia's population usage of devices, Internet, and social media from January 2020 to January 2021. By total estimations in January 2021, Armenia had a population of 2.97 million, of which 2.02 million people had access to the Internet. (Kemp, 2021) Based on the data, it could be estimated that 68.01%, more than half of the population in the electoral process, had access to the Internet. From January 2020, before the 44-day war, to January 2021, the post-war electoral process, the number of Internet users increased by 107 thousand. This data on the increase in public usage of the Internet shows the public's increased interest in getting various forms of information from online platforms. DataReportal ranks the most searched websites by the Armenian public through the Internet: Google.com, Youtube.com, and News. am, Facebook.com, Mamul.am. These websites were the most searched in Armenian electoral discourse because they were the primary information dissemination tools, and tens of thousands of news-related posts and videos were published to grab the public's attention through these exact websites. Even though the article "Revolution, Covid-19, and War in Armenia: Impacts on Various Forms of Trust" states that the overall post-war public Discourse trust towards media declined from 29% in 2019 to 10% in 2021, but people were still interested in what is happening in the country thereof accessing media to find information. DataReportal estimates that out of 2.02 million Internet users, 1.8 million were active social media users, and the estimated number from January 2020 to January 2021 increased by 300,000, meaning the number of people actively using social media increased by 20% in one year. The statistics prove that even though the trust in online-based news through social media content decreased among the public, people still had the urge to get information, and the primary tool of getting

information was indeed social media. As a result, in the 2021 Armenian electoral process, there was a disharmony of media trust and media consumption, as people distrusted media, especially social networks, but consumed information from there, which adversely affected people's media perception.

The analytical report on "Media Consumption and Media Coverage of Reforms in Armenia" in 2021 used a random sampling methodology proportionate to population size by asking 1213 Armenians from all 10 regions and Yerevan about their media consumption. The survey is a valuable resource for identifying the reasons for media consumption in the 2021 electoral process. The margin of error of the sample size for the 2021 survey is with a 95% confidence level equaled  $\pm 2.8\%$ , meaning that if the survey were repeated multiple times, 95% of the time, the results would be the same and give only  $\pm 2.8\%$  error. (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) In the survey, people of different genders, ages, and economic and educational backgrounds participated, giving valuable data on the reasons for using social media and other media platforms. The survey showed that Internet resources and social networks were the most frequently used sources of information in Armenia for 2021; 67 percent of the respondents reported using the Internet and social networks daily to access information, out of which 34 percent share only political and social news. (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) Consequently, it could be evaluated that quite a big percentage of people used social media to get access to news. In the electoral process, Pashinyan and Kocharyan, along with other candidates, mostly used Facebook to disseminate news announcements and speeches. It is detected that starting from 2018 till 2021, constantly on a daily basis, "Prime Minister Pashinyan chose Facebook posts and live streams as his main communication tool with society." (Terzyan, p.5, 2024) Compared to this, Kocharyan's

Facebook account only became active starting on 25 April 2021, when Nikol Pshinyan officially announced that there would be a snap election in June 2021. The choice of candidate of choosing Facebook as the primary source of content production and information dissemination was not random. DataReportal estimates that in 2021, the potential audience that Facebook reports can reach using adverts on Facebook is 1,50 million, meaning that the Facebook content could reach 1.50 million Armenians. (Kemp, 2021) Caucasus Research Resource Center's analysis of Facebook users shows that overall, 89% of Facebook users use the platform to access news. For other social platforms such as Instagram, Odnoklassniki, LinkedIn, Vkontakte, and TikTok, less than half of those having accounts on these platforms use them to access news. (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) As a result of this observation, it could be concluded that the post-war Armenian discourse, even having lost its trust in the credibility of overall media on a daily basis, accessed news, specifically using the social media platform Facebook, to access news. Based on this disharmony of media trust and media consumption, it could be concluded that social media usage to access news adversely affected people's media perception by artificially impacting their behavior and choices during the electoral process.

### **6.1.2 Quantitative Research: The Usage of News Websites**

The article "The Mapping of the Media in Armenia in the Context of the Fight Against Dis/misinformation" states that while problematic websites in the field of dissemination were studied, the characteristics of dis/misinformation were highly present in the time of 2020-2021. In the Armenian post-war discourse, many people didn't trust news websites, mostly because of the information produced by suspicious people. Seventy percent of respondents participating in the Caucasus Research Resource Center's survey answered that the information on the websites

seemed to be suspicious or unreliable, as the headlines of the articles and the content did not match, and the content was shared by unreliable and unknown websites/people. (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) As a result, it could be concluded that websites were not credible in the public eye, just as social media platforms. However, it is important to note that even though people did not directly use websites to get information, they got access to these websites' content through social media links. It is estimated that only 24 percent of the respondents consume online news media directly via websites, whereas 76 percent access online news media via social media links. (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) Thus, it can be concluded that even though people were not using media websites to get news, social media platforms fed people with information from these websites through links.

### **6.1.3 Quantitative Research: The usage of traditional media**

In comparison with social media usage, Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation shows that the usage of traditional media was relatively low, but the respondents were satisfied with the media coverage of newspapers, local and national radio, and television channels. Even though people were satisfied with traditional media, their consumption of television "has decreased overall from 82 percent to 59 percent, and daily consumption of Armenian and Russian Newspapers decreased, from 10 percent in 2015 to 3 percent in 2021." (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) Again, here can be identified disharmony between trust and consumption of media because in the Armenian public discourse, the most trusted media platforms are used less than the least trusted media platforms. The problem comes from the fact that the vast majority of the respondents (89%) who access online

news media directly prefer to access it via smartphone rather than TV or any other traditional media platform. (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2021). The explanation behind it is that accessing online news is easier and faster compared to traditional media platforms, as news on online platforms appears in seconds, and people can use the search bar to access any news they want. While traditional media platforms offer news at a slower frequency and in smaller quantities compared to online platforms. As a result, according to a survey, the problem is not the content of traditional media but the device through which people access news.

However, even though the number of traditional media users decreased, the survey estimates that “59 percent of people still used TV to get news” in the 2021 electoral process. (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) This means that both candidates also had the opportunity to represent themselves through traditional media platforms by using all the opportunities traditional media provided, such as announcing news and giving live speeches. Influential TV channels indeed were good tools for candidates to disseminate information and influence the public. According to survey respondents, the top reliable TV channels were Public TV, Shant TV, Armenia TV, and Azatutyun Radio Station, which, according to the respondents, were covering the news in Armenia best of all. (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation, 2021) Cooperating with International Media Support (IMS), the Yerevan Press Club identified Armenia's National TV function during the 2021 electoral campaign. It is estimated that Armenian National TV included coverage by both the public and the national private TV channels, and the central issue of the TV program was the production of news, and commercial/social advertisement slots were mostly excluded from production. (Yerevan Press Club, 2021) This means that almost all candidates, specifically those

owning private TV channels, used TV to produce mostly news and disseminate updates on their campaign process.

## **Qualitative Research**

### **6.2 Qualitative Research: Media Restrictions**

In its data, Freedom House identifies that historically, the government of Armenia had rarely restricted content, and the only exception was the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020, aligned with the COVID-19 pandemic. During that chaotic time, the state of emergency regime set various restrictions on different media platforms, encouraging the public to only refer to official websites. The various forms of mass and social media restrictions adopted during the armed conflict resulted in a decline in Internet freedom in Armenia. In the 2021 snap elections, the number of Internet users significantly increased, and the government set some media limitations; however, the quality of media in post-war toxic discourse got worse. The primary problem was dis/misinformation, and it came from "the slow, uncoordinated, contradictory information provided by state institutions greatly contributes to the disinformation and misconceptions spread in the information field of Armenia." (Freedom of Information Center, 2021) The primary goal of the current government at the time was to win the elections instead of establishing a healthy, free, and plural environment in the media sector. This unbalanced need of the government led the media to produce selective and misleading content, which in turn brought discontent and vulnerability to information among Armenians. Due to the flow of misleading information, there was an urge to stop the misleading content. In its study, Freedom House identifies that it is essential for the government to provide strategic communication in the media by "responding to journalists' inquiries, responding to the information circulated in the public domain; otherwise,

people remain vulnerable to false narratives that fill the information vacuum. (UNESCO, 2022)

In the 2021 Armenian electoral process, the sample of effective communication was misused by the leading government official Nikol Pashinyan as instead of responding to content produced in media and explaining its validity to the public, he "imposed several new restrictions on journalistic freedoms in 2021, including limiting the free movement of journalists in the parliament. (Terzyan, p.6, 2024) This unexplained restriction raised significant disagreements among the opposition parties and the public, as the restriction was seen as banning the content selectively and not purely based on the aim to mitigate the amount of misleading content. Even though the government announced that all the restrictions were to decrease misleading information flow and illegal actions in the media, the government still violated effective communication with the public. In addition, "The RA Electoral Code prohibits any form of campaigning 44 hours before election day;" however, the leading government, Nikol Pashinyan, disregarded the prohibition of campaign content 44 hours before election day for other candidates and continued to make his own content, which was against the law. (Yerevan Press Club, 2021) All of these actions done through the media brought more dissatisfaction in the post-war traumatized public where one part of the people appreciated Pashinyan's moves, and another part of the public, including some organizations, widely suspended, criticized and called these media restrictions and "improvements" as "an end to government obstruction, of the media." (Terzyan, p.6, 2024)

### **6.2.1 Qualitative Research: Mis/Disinformation**

Before analyzing how much dis/misinformation was present in the 2021 electoral process in different media platforms, it would be valuable first to identify the types of information and

how they differ. Khalatyan and Margaryan, in their report "Disinformation in Armenia: Examining Public Perceptions," examined different terms, such as misinformation, disinformation, fake news, or malinformation, used around the world to define disinformation. The research identified that disinformation is false information that does not correspond to reality and is intentionally directed to spread fake news. On the other hand, misinformation is false information that is not necessarily intended to cause harm but still carries information that does not correspond to reality. Malinformation interestingly differs from both as it is information that carries some facts; however, the information is cut from the original context and put in a different context, making the information false. In the 2021 electoral discourse, all three information types were present. Some political personas or political groups intend to spread disinformation or fake news to divert people's mindsets and affect their political choices. In the same way, different channels and groups on different media platforms cut some factual information from the context and immersed it into another context, which again caused misunderstanding and false perceptions in public. Finally, in the Armenian electoral process, there were media that were producing semi-entertaining, semi-informational content, which indicates that these were not professional news but were so-called "mushroom media" and that misleading content was present in their news. Freedom of Information Center did an analysis to identify "the senders and disseminators of dis/misinformation," and they singled out several groups of sources. The research showed that the main disseminators of disinformation in the Armenian 2021 electoral process were "ideological groups, Facebook groups, real or fake accounts and pages, opinion leaders and decision-makers on social networks, media owned by the former government, clickbait websites, "mushroom media" and Russian websites or translations from those websites." (Freedom of Information Center, p.11, 2021) Some Facebook

accounts led by individuals and mushroom media may not intentionally spread misleading information, which means that their content was mostly misinformation or malinformation because of their lack of proficiency in content and news production. As a result, the media in the 2021 elections was based on different groups and subgroups who produced different kinds of information and news based on their needs and intentions via producing disinformation and mis/malinformation, which was mostly directed to affect people's political choices.

### **6.2.2 Social Media & Websites**

In a report on "Public Access to Information," UNESCO states that "Free, independent, plural and diverse media and access to independent, factual and evidence-based information are, in fact, important to counter disinformation." (UNESCO, 2022) However, recently, different media platforms, mainly social media content, have been heavily based on mis/disinformation, creating information disorder in the public. Aside from producing misleading information, social media, by its algorithms, creates bubbles for people to feed on the same related information, which in turn influences people's access to diverse information. A survey was conducted by a Caucasian Barometer to identify social media's influence and content quality in Armenia's 2021 election process. The results show that 63 percent of respondents consider that the effect of social media on the general situation in Armenia was mostly negative, as the content mainly consisted of the spread of disinformation and fake news. While analyzing social media's content and measuring it as negative in the discourse of the 2021 elections, it is also important to identify why and how social media became a platform for misleading information. According to the study by the Freedom of Information Center, the main sources of mis/disinformation in Armenia have been the media outlets related to the former authorities and platforms of influencers holding

different political beliefs. (Freedom of Information Center, p.3, 2024) As a result, the study concluded that the false narratives in the 2021 electoral process were disseminated through influential users or channels of social media, which content mostly can be identified as both entertaining and informative which do not create original content based on statistics and news but rather enforce their beliefs to be spread in the public. In addition to this, on social media, tens of thousands of website links appeared with diverse headlines and photos, directing people to open and consume the information. As people preferred to use social media instead of searching website links on the Internet, thus different website owners and channels brought these links and accumulated social media with website links to keep people updated with their information. To make content more interesting and attractive, individuals or influencers used fake but "eye-catching headlines and photos to entice readers to click on an article or image or a link that takes them to another website, where the information does not always match the headline or photo." (Khalatyan, 2024) These tricks were directed at persuading people to open the website links and consume unnecessary information based on false statistics, as these aim not to give news but to persuade people to believe in false narratives to make choices in the upcoming elections. So the social media content included all types of manipulative tools such as "video manipulation techniques, falsification of official documents, the use of automated Internet software applications (bots) to spread and generate debates on social media," all with an aim trigger people to believe in the content and influence their choices and decisions. (Freedom of Information Center, p.4, 2024) The post-war traumatized public was harshly affected by this social media's misleading content as the news from one to another radically differed, and people didn't know which one to believe and which to disregard. This generated huge waves of dissatisfaction in the public, leading people to "voice highly radical and extreme ideas, such as

completely blocking social media, especially during a state of emergency or martial law." (Khalatyan, 2024) As a result, it could be concluded that social media, including different website links on it, in the electoral process, were producing misleading information that negatively impacted people, first causing delusion in people's political choices and, second, generating distrust towards social media content.

### **6.2.3 Traditional Media**

Even though, in recent Armenian reality, people started using TV less compared to online media sources, it is estimated by the Caucasus Research Resource Center that 72% of Armenians consider the quality of television news to be more reliable compared to any other online media news and information. Then, a deep analysis was done by the International Republican Institute to map people's post-election expectations of different TV channels. The study identified a few media channels as the most viewed and trusted by people, and the top three were Public TV (H1) (23%), Shant TV (11%), and Armenia TV (9%) in terms of trust. (Freedom of Information Center, p.14, 2021) However, even though the public trusted these TV channels, it's essential to study their owners to identify whether these channels were indeed state-owned, unbiased, and trusted or vice versa. After the 2018 Velvet Revolution, even after accepting laws and regulations of traditional media outlets to maintain transparency, "current and former politicians still remain influential in the creation of media content through obscured ownership," making the information and news production more biased. (AidData, 2022)

#### **Public TV (H1)**

Public TV, or H1, is owned 100 percent by the Government of the Republic of Armenia, and people trusted the media the most, as there was a presumption that it did not correlate with

political parties or organizations and functions isolated from political pressure. However, indeed, the current government, with the leadership of Nikol Pashinyan, had a wide impact on the function of Public TV, and during the campaign, Public TV continued to showcase the Pashinyan campaign, interviews, speeches, and announcements intended to "advertise" him to be elected. A study done by the Yerevan Press Club examining the monitoring of the Armenian media coverage of the June 20 Parliamentary elections identifies a few key points of the nature of the coverage of different media channels, including Public TV. The study determined the number of coverage and recorded the nature of the references that different media outlets made toward specific parties "positive, negative, or neutral." (Yerevan Press Club, p.8, 2021) It is estimated that Public TV, in a short period of time before elections (May 31- June 6), referred to Nikol Pashinyan's "Civil Contract" party 15 times by producing various forms of content, including interviews, news reports, and announcements. In its coverage, 12 units of media coverage were neutral, while two had a bit of negative content, and one was positive. Compared to Civil Contracts coverage, Public TV referred to Robert Kocharyan's Armenia Alliance Contract 11 times, out of which four times negative, zero times positive, and seven times neutral. The analysis shows that there was some pressure from Nikol Pashinyan on state-owned TV channels, as the number of references to civil contracts outweighed the coverage of other parties. Also, during its Public TV, it only referred positively one time, and that was about the Civil Contract. The number of negative references to the Civil Contract was relatively lower compared to other parties, and some negative references were indeed acts of establishing neutrality and enforcing the concept that Public TV indeed covers its news freely and is isolated from political pressures.

## **Shant TV**

The next most trusted TV channel in Armenia in the 2021 electoral process was Shant TV, which was founded by journalist Arthur Yezekyan and shared before 2018 with Armen Minas, who was tied to Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan. (AidData, p.9, 2022) As Samvel Karapetyan had good relations with post-political elite leaders, including Robert Kocharyan, the coverage of the media still could be considered biased. After 2018, Yezekyan started to hold Shant TV with Aram Mnatsakanyan, who has no correlation with any political organisation. However, even though there were no other political elite shareholders of the TV, still in the 2021 electoral process, there was some opinion-led coverage by Shant TV. It is estimated that Shant TV covered Armenia Alliance 12 times, of which two were positive, zero were negative, and 10 were neutral. In comparison, Shant TV covered Civil Contracts 11 times, out of which two times were negative, one time was positive, and eight times were neutral. From the coverage, it can be apparent that Shant TV was more pro-Armenia Alliance, as there was no negativity towards their campaign and even two positive coverages, while in Civil Contract's coverage, they reacted negatively twice. As a result, it can be estimated that even though Shant TV was owned by an individual with no direct political direction still, the relationships of the current owner with the old political elite might have contributed to Shant TV taking a specific direction in their coverage.

## **Armenia TV**

Armenia TV was the third most trusted media by the public, and AidData provides details that the 100 percent owner of the TV channel is Robert Hovhannisyan, who is suspected of having close Russian ties, meaning the Russian impact on news coverage of Armenian TV was

relatively high compared to other media channels. It is estimated that Armenia TV referred to Civil Contract eight times, out of which six times were negative, zero times positive, and two times neutral. In comparison, Armenia TV referred to Armenia Alliance five times, out of which two were negative, zero times positive, and three times neutral. Even though Armenia TV negatively covered both parties' campaigns, it is obvious by numbers that the TV had a specific direction to be fully against Pashinyan's Civil Contract party, as it negatively covered the majority of units of their campaign. Because of this negative coverage by Armenia TV, it can be measured that, again, the TV had a specific political direction and didn't maintain the neutrality of news coverage in their reports.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The 2021 political election was a manifested political result of the 44-day war's traumatic situation, which brought more political chaos and significantly traumatized the Armenian public, resulting in extreme polarization. Consequently, the political chaos that originated during the war was reflected in the 2021 elections, and while there was no core ideological difference between the political parties, the public during those days got extremely polarised because of different degrees of post-war experiences. Indeed, different components could be identified as polarisation tools, such as the media, the candidate's various methods to attract the public, or people's differing political views. However, these components were not the main factors of polarization; these were tools to trigger the post-war traumatized public to react and participate in the elections. In this circumstance, the main pillar of the polarization came from people's differing opinions, directly influenced by their post-war traumatic depression degrees and their urge to find the right candidate to survive the situation. Therefore, the differing opinions of the public

were not based on differing political views but on people's varying experiences and traumas caused by war, which in turn influenced the spread of different beliefs among people on which political persona would be able to solve the chaotic situation.

The trauma, depression, and anxiety that were present within the public in 2021 political discourse had reasonable roots and were not limited only to the context of the 2020 war but stemmed from the 1915 tragic genocidal context. Only one hundred and five years passed after the genocide, and Turkey again started to disturb Armenia's peace. The past tragic genocidal experiences combined with present losses of war made the public terrified and accept the possibility of upcoming threats from historical enemies. Consequently, this forced the nation to bring awareness of the "struggle for survival" from 1915 to 2020 and 2021. In 2021, the concept of "struggle for survival" was reflected in the political elections, and the public viewed it as the last hope of resolving the situation by choosing the right candidate who would be able to solve the situation. As a result, as the elections were directly connected to the 44-day war and Turkey, it indicates that people during the elections were in a post-war traumatic state when their decisions were highly based on emotions and varying degrees of war experiences. Here, it can be concluded that different experiences shaped different degrees of trauma, and thus, they caused different kinds of perceptions among the people, and each had their own understanding of which candidate could solve the problem.

The public in those days became divided into two parts, one supporting political candidate Nikol Pashinyan and the other supporting Robert Kocharyan. Two candidates with support from different post-war traumatized targeted groups started their campaigns by using media to deepen the "struggle of survival" concept in public and, via different manipulative and strategic campaign methods, triggered the public to react. The representation of themselves from

a better perspective as stronger and heroic in the post-war circumstances became more influential to the public than the political agenda; thus, both started using media as a tool to regain public trust. The process's main tools were using various symbols, narratives, and accusations of the opposites to receive public approval to be the next political leader in Armenia. The second strategy was the usage of hate and violent speech, which targeted and threatened the reputation and dignity of the opposing candidate to trigger the post-war traumatized public. This strategy aimed to announce or make speeches that were mainly aimed at attacking the opposite side to take away their credit from the public eye. The third strategy candidates used was the social categorization of the public based on people's political choices, which again were based on their war experiences. This categorization is intended to show that some are right in their decisions, some are extremely wrong, and the emphasis on being wrong in their political decisions, the candidate Robert Kocharyan put on the public's illiteracy. Nikol Pahinyan mostly used emotional manipulation, and instead of categorizing them, he formed the categorization in a way that wasn't as direct as in Kocharyan's speeches. His approach is intended to show that there are no opposites to his leadership aside from previous political clans. To conclude this part, all of these strategies and tactics were used via different media platforms and were directly intended to trigger the public to take a step and choose the "right" candidate. For the post-war traumatized public, these media tactics and strategies were not merely sources to be informed and make decisions, but also tools that influenced the public on a psychological level, which resulted in deepening the existing polarization to a level when people became intolerant towards each other.

All media strategies indeed played a huge role in further shaping people's decisions, and it was estimated that people were aware that the produced content included manipulative, fake, or triggering announcements and posts. However, despite high levels of mis/distrust towards the

media, people still excessively used it to get news and be informed about the electoral process. Overall, this illustrates a disharmony of media trust and consumption, as people distrusted media but consumed information from there. The imbalance of trust and consumption adversely affected people's media perception, as the media was considered the primary source of information, but they were aware that the falsehood of the content could be very high. People mainly used social media to access news, and the most used social platform in Armenia was Facebook, which was precisely used by candidates to process their campaigns. Interestingly, the most used media platforms, especially Facebook, aligned with other social media platforms and website links, were considered the least credible ones by the public. Compared to trust towards social media platforms, with traditional media, it can be concluded that traditional media, especially TV, was considered the most credible. Still, it is essential to note that even traditional media, especially TV, selectively covered certain political news because the owners of these TV channels had differing political views, which not fully but partially impacted the TV coverage. However, the falsehoods of TV news and social media were not the same, as TV somehow framed the news, but still kept the formality and neutrality compared to social media. Despite this, the comparison of numbers of the usage of social media and traditional media shows that a considerably lower percentage of people use traditional media to access news. Again, the disharmony of media trust and consumption in this circumstance is violated, and the reason behind it is the device through which people access news. While accessing news through social media using phones is a matter of seconds, the TV does not offer the same speed and variety in content. Thus, uncertainty is generated when people mistrust the media platform but still use it merely because of its easy accessibility. As access to false content on social platforms was preferred by the public compared to other forms of media, the political parties took advantage of

this and used it to their favor. It was measured that the primary sources of mis/disinformation in Armenia have been the media outlets related to the present and former authorities and platforms of influencers holding different political beliefs. Their aim was to attract the public to their side with the goal of being elected; thus, to achieve it, they framed the news the way they preferred. Social media in those days was filled with tens of eye-catching headlines and photos that sometimes enormously differed from reality and were created or cut out from the actual content to influence the public and their decision falsely. The post-war traumatized public was harshly affected by this social media's misleading content, as the news from one to another radically differed. The radical differences came from differing political parties and different influencers holding different opinions, which led to social media producing biased content that aimed not to cover the case fully but rather frame it in favor of certain politicians. In these circumstances, people didn't know which one to believe and which to disregard, which in turn brought more polarization of the public because their opinions were not based on actual news but differing content, which each person preserved on their own. As a result, social media, in the electoral process, negatively impacted the post-traumatized public and deepened the existing variations in opinions. The initial differences in the public's views in the 2021 electoral process indeed came from their differing degrees of experiences from war, and their new political ideas were heavily based on the previous losses and concerns about the future. In this case, the media added new waves of contrasting and misleading content, which deepened the misunderstanding and chaos in public, triggering a traumatized public to form significantly different views of how to act and whom to choose in the elections.

Four years have passed since the elections, and till now, the toxic environment is still present in all aspects of social life. People carry the fears, anxieties, intolerance, and

disagreements from past experiences and apply them in a new context each year. Even if the psychological influence is not very apparent and in most contexts, people themselves can not identify that they are still psychologically affected, the analysis of the people's actions and behavior can lead to conclusions that everything that happened in 2021 and in further years was actions based not on rational understanding but more of emotional. In 2024, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan started new protests and encouraged the public to follow him and remove the current government from leadership. Many followed, and many disagreed. The core of the disagreements was not Bagrat's political agenda, as he didn't directly show one, but associations between him and two candidates, Nikol Pashinyan and Robert Kocharyan. These two political leaders still are personas whose government was not merely based on ideology but more on concepts of good and bad. While one associates good with patriotism and the ability to fight, others associate it with being modern and being able to make peace with enemies. While some see good leaders as uncorrupt, others put emphasis on leaders being strong. These differing views first come from people's past experiences and degrees of how much they were affected and how they faced and handled it. While some still remember the genocide or wars, they have revenge on Turks/Azerbaijanis and consider it absurd to establish agreements with them. Others are not so affected or are proceeding differently and are afraid of war experiences, and consider that settling well-established relations and living a peaceful life is better. These experiences are different, and there are tens of thousands like this; however, the idea is the same: people's differing opinions come psychologically from the degree of trauma they experienced, which in turn immensely affected the polarisation of the 2021 elections.

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