

Armenia: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels

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Introduction

What are the entry points for foreign actors to shape and influence the narrative in the Armenian media market? This profile seeks to address some of the entry points related to media ownership and Russian state-owned media. AidData recognizes that malign influence may affect narrative creation in other ways, including the republishing of foreign content in domestic media outlets, interactions on social media, and through journalist biases. However, this project focuses solely on direct and indirect ownership of traditional domestic media outlets to identify potential entry points for Russian influence through elites and media owners. By better understanding Armenia's domestic media ownership environment, including what media outlets citizens consume and who the owners of those outlets are, we can anticipate entry points where malign actors may try to influence domestic narratives.

Armenian media ownership data is fairly transparent due to a public government business registry (e-register.am). While this site is currently online, it was publicly unavailable from mid-2020 until early 2022, meaning that in recent years there have been large periods of time where ownership data was opaque. Since owners of top media houses have the potential to influence the content and tone of topics covered by journalists in their employ, understanding who owns the media is crucial to identifying avenues for influence and potential bias in reporting. In this profile, we begin to close this gap with an in-depth look at domestic media ownership in Armenia.

This media ownership profile and the supporting data were prepared by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute.¹ The data for this profile was collected manually by AidData staff and student research assistants. We began by conducting web searches to identify a list of media in Armenia, and then identified a list of the top-ranked outlets in terms of overall consumption. We then used this information to gather the ownership data. We used cross-country sources when

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available (e.g., Zenith, Alexa²), as well as the Armenian government business registry, survey data, media watchdog sources, and other open source data.

In the following sections, we provide summary data on the presence of Russian state-owned media, top outlets, and media ownership in Armenia as of 2021 (or the most contemporary data available). This profile focuses on the ownership of traditional broadcast, print, and online media outlets. Social media is not included in this analysis. By mapping out the ownership and influence of traditional forms of media, these profiles lend insights into potential channels for foreign influence in the top consumed outlets.

Russian Media Footprints

The most direct form of Kremlin influence in Armenia's media landscape is via Russian state-owned media (see Table 1). Ten of the eleven Russian state-owned media outlets we tracked have a physical presence in Armenia, which provides the Kremlin with a strong channel to directly communicate with, and ultimately influence, Armenian citizens. Physical presence includes physical infrastructure, such as cable packages, physical office space or local bureaus, and radio broadcasters, but excludes satellite broadcasting and online or streaming availability. Table 1 provides a footprint of Russian state-owned media presence in Armenia, but does not speak to how well-consumed each outlet is by Armenian citizens.

² Zenith is a media intelligence database that provides insights into media, including television viewership and newspaper circulation, in several dozen countries around the world. Alexa is an online analysis tool. AidData Staff used Alexa's API to gauge website traffic. <https://www.alexacom/siteinfo>.

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Armenia, 2021

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✓	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✗	Sputnik	✓	TASS	✓
Russia 24	✓					Sputnik	✓
Russia K	✓						
RTR-Planeta	✓						
TV Centre	✓						
Channel One	✓						
RT	✓						

Other indirect forms of Russian influence are possible, including domestic outlets republishing narratives and pro-Russian journalists in-country. In this profile, AidData has captured direct Russian channels of influence through state-owned media infrastructure.

Top Media Outlets

Table 2 identifies the top five most-consumed media outlets in Armenia by medium (television, print, radio, and online) based on cross-sectional indicators such as viewership share and circulation. Television is the most-consumed medium in Armenia, though the younger population prefers online outlets.³ This preference likely makes TV and online outlets more influential, while radio and print media are less consumed. While we cannot know the exact influence of each individual outlet, we can assume that outlets that reach higher numbers of consumers have greater potential to influence more citizens. Despite the presence of many Russian state-owned media outlets in Armenia, no Russian media appears in the top five outlets for any medium.

³ "Armenia Profile - Media." BBC. Published January 14, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17404535>.

AidData used a weighted average of media consumption survey rankings from 2017 to present to determine the top media outlets in Armenia. This strategy offers a more long-term perspective of top media outlets, rather than a snapshot of the top media outlets right now. As such, the top outlets may not exactly reflect the current order of most-consumed outlets, but do show a solid picture of the media landscape over the past five years. Recent rankings are weighted more heavily to adjust for new changes.⁴

Table 2: Top Armenian media outlets ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Television	Print	Radio	Online
1	Shant TV	Aravot	RFE/RL (Azatutyun)	News.am
2	ArmeniaTV	Haykakan Zhamanak	Public Radio of Armenia	Azatutyun.am
3	H1 (Public Television of Armenia)	ArmenPress	Radio Aurora	Mamul.am
4	Kentron TV	Hetq	Radio Van FM	1in.am
5	ArmNews TV	Hraparak	Hay Radio	Shamshyan.com

According to findings from an AidData survey of regional and local media experts in 2021, the majority of top Armenian outlets mirror the results of open-source data collection by AidData researchers. However, additional outlets excluded from this top outlet list but ranked highly by local experts include the newspaper 168 Zham, the radio stations Russkoe Radio and Armenian National Radio, and the online outlets a1plus.am and aravot.am.

⁴ Television, Print and Radio: Television, radio and print rankings were calculated using multiple publicly available surveys and circulation data, including an AidData survey of country and regional experts conducted in summer 2021. Additional survey data came from: the Advanced Public Research Group’s Media Survey (2019), the International Republican Institute’s Public Opinion Survey (2019/2020), IREX’s Media Sustainability Index (2019), Rank.am’s online rankings (2021), and CRRC Armenia’s Media Consumption and Media Coverage of Reforms in Armenia report (2019). Online: Alexa, April 2021.

Media Ownership

Table 3 lists the ownership information of top Armenian media outlets by medium (television, newspaper, radio, and online). Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the new political landscape has dramatically altered media ownership in Armenia, creating a rapidly changing media space and encouraging ownership transparency.⁵ While 2010 legislation prevented politicians from owning media outlets, the laws in Armenia were unevenly enforced and political elites dominated media ownership before the revolution. However, following the revolution, stronger enforcement of the laws on media ownership began, forcing some changes to the ownership of top media outlets.⁶ Further examples of ownership ties and relationships are discussed in the following section.

In order to highlight which outlets may be more susceptible to Russian influence, AidData staff have devised a four-point scale to indicate levels of Russian ownership. This scale is color-coded shades of red in the table below to indicate 1) Direct Russian ownership, 2) Known Russian ties, 3) Suspected Russian ties, and 4) No Russian ties. Additionally, Armenian state-owned media is color-coded blue. In Armenia, one owner had suspected or known ties to the Russian government, and no top outlets had direct Russian ownership. As such, this profile has one red color-code and three designations of state-owned media.

Table 3: Ownership of top Armenian media outlets by share

 No Russian ties
 Suspected Russian ties
 Known Russian ties
 Direct Russian ownership
 Local state-owned media

Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)
Television	1	Shant TV	Shant LLC	Arthur Yezekyan	52
				Aram Armenovich Mnatsakanyan	48
	2	ArmeniaTV	Panarm LLC	Robert Hovhannisyan	100

⁵ “Armenia Profile - Media.” BBC. Published January 14, 2020.

⁶ Nahapetyan, Alina. “The challenges of Armenia’s media landscape.” New Eastern Europe. Published November 14, 2021. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/11/14/the-challenges-of-armenias-media-landscape/>

	3	H1	Government of the Republic of Armenia	100
	4	Kentron TV	Multi Media-Kentron TV CJSC	Sedrak Arustamyan 100
	5	ArmNews TV	Qaryak Media CJSC	Arman Saghatelyan 25 Samvel Farmanyan 25 Karen Bekaryan 25 Mihran Hakobyan 25
Print	1	Aravot	Aravot Daily LLC	Aram Abrahamyan 100
	2	Haykakan Zhamanak	Dareskizb LLC	Kim Sarkisovna Mkrtchyan 70 Hayk G. Gevorgyan 20 Petros Stepanovich Makeyan 10
	3	ArmenPress	Government of the Republic of Armenia	100
	4	Hetq	Investigative Journalists of Armenia NGO	Edik Baghdasaryan 100
	5	Hraparak	Hraparak Daily LLC	Armine Ohanyan 90 Sevak Grigoryan 10
Radio	1	Radio Azatutyun	Government of the United States	100
	2	Public Radio of Armenia	Government of the Republic of Armenia	100
	3	Radio Aurora	Aurora Media Holding	Michael Janpoladyan 100
	4	Radio Van FM	Odensnus AB Radio Van LLC	Gevorg Nalbandyan 49 David Hovsepyan 36 Shushanik Arevhatyan 10 Hrant Gohar Yeghiazaryan 5
	5	Hay Radio	Radio Hay LLC	Anahit Tarkhanyan 100
Online	1	News.am	Armenian News-NEWS.am	Armenika Kiviryan 100

Information-Analytical Agency				
2	Azatutyun.am	Government of the United States		100
3	Mamul.am	Social Media LLC	Sevag Melikyan	100
4	1in.am	First News LLC	Arman Babajanyan	50
			Anahid Shahinyan	50
5	Shamshyan.com	Shamshyan Media LLC	Gagik Shamshyan	100

Results

Television

Television remains the most-consumed media in Armenia: 72% of Armenians watch at least one nationally broadcast television program every day.⁷ The top television channels consist of a mix of private and public ownership. The change in ownership trends between pre-Velvet Revolution and post-Velvet Revolution is highly apparent in television outlets. Political elites and politicians that dominated the pre-2018 Armenian media space are significantly less powerful than they were previously.

The most watched television outlet in Armenia is Shant TV, founded by journalist Arthur Yezekyan. Yezekyan remains a majority owner of the outlet today, with a minority stake owned by Aram Mnatsakanyan. Prior to the revolution, the minority stake owner was Armen Minas, who was tied to Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan, as well as other wealthy political elites in the Kocharyan government.⁸ Today, political elites no longer own shares in Shant TV, highlighting the changes from 2018 to present. According to a 2022 IRI poll, Shant TV is one of the most trusted outlets in Armenia today.⁹

ArmeniaTV, the second most-watched television outlet, also underwent major changes pre- and post-revolution. Initially part of the 2012 conglomerate PanArmenian Media

⁷ "Media Consumption and Media Coverage of Reforms in Armenia," Media Initiative Center. Published August 2019. https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MICE-Report-2019_.pdf.

⁸ Baghdasaryan, Edik. "Media Moguls: On the Trail of Armenian TV Owners." Hetq.am. Published July 5, 2010. <https://hetq.am/en/article/45873>.

⁹ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia." International Republican Institute. Published January 31, 2022. <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-surveyresidents-of-armenia/>

Group (PAMG), ArmeniaTV was controlled by some of the most influential political elites. PAMG owned both ArmeniaTV and ATV, as well as Tert.am, Lav Radio, ArmNews, and a number of other outlets across mediums. Armenia's third president, Serzh Sargsyan, was reportedly a significant shareholder of these outlets until 2019, when PAMG was split and divided between a number of owners. Following the collapse of PAMG, Russian media mogul Artur Janibekyan became the sole owner of ArmeniaTV;¹⁰ however, according to the business registry, Robert Hovhannisyan is the 100% beneficiary of ArmeniaTV through PanArm LLC. Hovhannisyan is likely an intermediary owner for Janibekyan, who is the head of Gazprom-Media, one of the largest Russian entertainment media holdings. An Armenian entertainment and media producer in Russia, Janibekyan controls Russian outlets TNT, NTV, TV-3 and 2x2. This change highlights that, while Armenian politicians and political elites have been prevented from consolidating media outlets, foreign actors and wealthy elites still hold power in the Armenian media space.

The third-most watched television is H1 TV, run by the Armenian government.

Kentron TV, the fourth most-watched television outlet, is owned by Sedrak Arustamyan. However, Gagik Tsarukyan, founder and leader of the opposition Prosperous Armenia political party, founded and reportedly still controls the outlet through Arustamyan.¹¹ Arustamyan himself was arrested for bribery and corruption charges, but released on bail in December 2020.¹²

Similarly, ArmNews TV, the fifth most-watched television outlet, is owned by Qaryak Media CJSC, a media holding group founded and owned by four former Republican parliamentarians. While these former politicians no longer hold office, their presence

¹⁰ "Media holding PanArmenian Media Group collapsed, Artur Janibekyan became the owner of 'Armenia TV' and 'Radio Jan.'" Novosti Armenia. Published February 8, 2019. <https://newsarmenia.am/news/society/mediaholding-panarmenian-media-group-raspalsya-artur-dzhani-bekyan-stal-vladeltsem-armenia-tv-i-radi/>

¹¹ Yeghiazaryan, Saten. "Armenia June 2021 elections: a guide to media landscape." Jam News. Published June 16, 2021. <https://jam-news.net/armenia-june-2021-elections-a-guide-to-media-landscape/>

¹² Mamulyan, Araks. "Yerevan Court Grants \$98,000 Bail to Multi Group LLC Director Sedrak Arustamyan." Hetq.am. Published December 3, 2020. <https://hetq.am/en/article/125000>.

controlling top media outlets could lead to the potential for changes to ArmNews TV's narrative to fit their former party's agenda.

In sum, while many changes have been made to decentralize and diversify Armenia's media space since the Velvet Revolution, political elites still play a role in the top television outlets. Additionally, some Russian influence is apparent in the ownership of top Armenian television outlets, such as Artur Janibekyan's control of ArmeniaTV.

Print

Print circulation and readership is on the decline in Armenia.¹³ Due to decreasing revenues, many print outlets rely on state funding in order to remain operational or have switched to fully online content. In line with state presence in the print sector, the state-owned newspaper ArmenPress is the third most-consumed print outlet.

Despite the role that the government of Armenia has played in financing print media outlets, many respected journalists wholly own the newspapers that they founded. For example, long-time journalist Aram Abrahamyan founded and fully owns Aravot, the most consumed print outlet in Armenia. Edik Baghdasaryan owns and operates the fourth most-consumed outlet Hetq through the "Investigative Journalists" NGO. Armine Ohanyan, the founder and editor-in-chief of Hraparak, the fifth most-consumed newspaper, owns 90% of the newspaper, with Sevak Grigoryan owning the remaining 10%.

However, like television, political elites still have a presence in the print sector. Haykakan Zhamanak, the second-most read newspaper, is politically linked to current Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan. Although he stepped down as editor-in-chief in 2012 following his election to parliament, Pashinyan's wife, Anna Hakobyan, took his place as editor and remains in that position now. The owners of Dareskizb LLC, the parent company of Haykakan Zhamanak, are reported through Armenia's business registry;

¹³

<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-armenia.pdf>

however, media reports claim that the Pashinyan family remains the owner of Haykakan Zhamanak and exerts political influence on the newspaper.¹⁴

While the majority of print outlets are owned by journalists, there are potential vulnerabilities for foreign or domestic political influence in the declining print space. Many print outlets in Armenia are reliant on state subsidies or external financing in order to continue operating, providing channels for foreign influence.¹⁵

Radio

Like television and print, radio ownership in Armenia is beginning to look more diverse and less controlled by political elites. However, the top two outlets are owned by two governments: the top consumed radio station is Azatutyun Radio, the Armenian branch of the US government-funded Radio Free Europe, and the second most-consumed radio station is the Armenian state-owned Public Radio of Armenia.

Like the print sector, many journalists own the radio stations that they created. For example, the third most-consumed radio station is Radio Aurora, wholly owned by founder and journalist Michael Janpoladyan. The fifth most-consumed station is Hay Radio, wholly owned by founder and journalist Anahit Tarkanyan. The fourth most-consumed radio station is Radio Van FM, which is partially owned by founder and director Shushanik Arevhatyan. However, the majority of the outlet is owned by Odensnuss AB, a Swedish tobacco company owned by Gevorg Nalbandyan. Additionally, the remaining shareholders are David Hovsepyan and Hrant Yeghiazaryan, who are relative unknowns in the Armenian media space.

In sum, top Armenian radio outlets are largely owned by their founders and fairly free from political elites. Notably, some foreign influence is present in Armenian top radio

¹⁴ Yeghiazaryan, Saten. "Armenia June 2021 elections: a guide to media landscape." Jam News. Published June 16, 2021.

¹⁵ "Armenia 2019: Media Sustainability Index." International Research and Exchanges Board. Published 2019.

<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-armenia.pdf>

stations, as Gevorg Nalbandyan is a Swedish-Armenian member of the diaspora and Radio Free Europe is owned by the US government.

Online

Top online outlets follow similar ownership trends as traditional media, where most outlets are owned by journalists, though some ownership by political elites exists. Like radio, the online version of Armenia's branch of Radio Free Europe is the second most-visited online outlet, Azatutyun.am.

As with other media categories, journalists control many of the top online outlets. The top most-consumed online outlet is News.am, wholly owned by editor-in-chief Armenika Kiviryan. According to a 2022 IRI poll, News.am is also the most trusted domestic online outlet among the Armenian population.¹⁶ A long-time journalist, Kiviryan formerly worked for Russian media outlets Regnum and Russkaya Mysl. Additionally, photojournalist Gagik Shamshyan founded and owns Shamshyan.com, the fifth most-consumed online outlet.

The third most-consumed online outlet is Mamul.am, wholly owned by Social Media LLC, an advertising company. Sevag Melikyan is the sole owner of Social Media LLC, though his background is relatively unknown. Mamul.am is also among the most trusted online outlets in Armenia.¹⁷

1in.am, or "First News" is the fourth most-consumed online outlet. Arman Babajanyan, former member of parliament and the current leader of the "For the Republic" political party, is the founder and partial owner of First News. Like other former politicians, Babajanyan's outlet has the potential to bias information in favor of his political views. AidData could find no additional information about the co-owner of First News, Anahit Shahinyan, with regard to the media space.

¹⁶ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia." International Republican Institute. Published January 31, 2022.

¹⁷ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia." International Republican Institute. Published January 31, 2022.

In sum, the ownership of online outlets is similar to traditional media, as most outlets are owned by journalists, with the presence of former politicians like Babajanyan and advertising companies like Social Media LLC. While it is easier for online outlets to co-opt Russian narratives or Russian state content than traditional media, no top online owners had ties to the Russian government.

Conclusion

In this brief, we have presented an overview of the domestic media environment of Armenia. The collected data highlight two major trends in Armenian media. First, though Russia has many avenues to directly communicate with the Armenian population, the owners of most top outlets do not appear to have ties to Russia. Second, while media ownership has become significantly more transparent since the Velvet Revolution, political elites still own shares in media outlets that are often obscured.

To address the first trend, Russian state-owned channels are abundant in Armenia, with ten of eleven state-owned outlets available in the country. Additionally, Russian entertainment content is often rebroadcast in Armenia, providing Russia with another channel to influence the Armenian population.¹⁸ However, with the exception of Artur Janibekyan, the owner of ArmeniaTV and head of Gazprom-Media, most top media owners do not have apparent ties to the Russian government. As a result, while Russian content has many channels for Armenians to consume, most Armenians prefer to consume domestic outlets.

Second, even with transparency laws, many current and former politicians still remain influential in the creation of media content through obscured ownership. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party Gagik Tsarukyan both have influence over top media outlets in Armenia. Former parliamentarian Arman Babajanyan controls 1in.am and four former Republican parliamentarians control

¹⁸ "Findings of Mass Media Monitoring in Armenia." Analytical Centre on Globalization and Regional Cooperation. Published 2019.
https://eesri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2019-04_Armenia-Media-Monitoring-2-ACGRC_PB-ENG.pdf.

ArmNews TV and Tert.am through Qaryak Media Group. As a result, while many top outlets are owned by journalists, some outlets are owned by political elites. This provides a further vulnerability for the Russian government to exploit, as politicians are more susceptible to Russian influence than journalists and may rely on Russian narratives to promote their political agenda.

In sum, while Russian state media outlets have an extensive presence in Armenia, few top media owners have ties to the Russian government. However, channels for influence of the media, through owners with Russian ties and political elites, remain available for foreign actors to exploit. Additionally, while the Velvet Revolution has changed Armenia's media ownership to foment more diversity, some political ownership exists through opaque channels.