



GRASS

REFORMANDA



## ISSUE 1



**MAY 8 - 22, 2020**

Dear readers, dear friends,

You are receiving this very first issue of the **Georgia Watch Briefing (GWB)**, which is a sister publication to other European Values' newsletters that you might know: [Kremlin Watch Briefing](#) and [Balkan Watch Briefing](#).

The objective of this bi-weekly newsletter is to provide you with the **recent policy developments and non-governmental activities in the area of monitoring, exposing, and countering hostile foreign influence in Georgia.**

We are producing this newsletter together with our Georgian partners: **Georgia's Reforms Associates** (GRASS), **Civic IDEA**, **Media Development Foundation** (MDF), and **Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab Georgia** (AC DFRLab).

We hope that you will like its content and will subscribe to it. Any feedback and suggestions are more than welcome.

Yours,

Editorial team

[SUBSCRIBE HERE](#)

---

## TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **The never-ending story about the Lugar laboratory in Georgia**
- **Few examples of Covid-19 related stories**
- **Group of hackers based in Georgia, who have been blackmailing British authorities**
- **Investigative work of three NGOs that were disclosing the background of recently removed Facebook accounts**

## RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

### **Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research – a target of never-ending propaganda**

Conspiracies about US bioweapon labs in Caucasus and Central Asia, and in particular about the Lugar Center, have circulated for a number of years in the Russian media. Lately, both **Russian and Chinese disinformation machines linked Lugar Lab to coronavirus and spread allegations about it**. Since its opening in 2011, Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research (Lugar Lab) has been a target of Russian disinformation warfare (most recently China [joined](#) the trend). Throughout the years Russian politicians and media have accused Lugar Lab of [spreading](#) H1N1 virus into Russia, deliberately [infecting](#) mosquitos with Zika Virus and conducting pathogen [testing](#) on Georgian population. In April 2018, within weeks of Britain pinpointing the Russian state as culpable for the Salisbury attack, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [discussed](#) "Pentagon's large-scale medical-biological activities near Russian borders", which later sparked some allegations in Russian media that the nerve-agent used in Skripal case originated in Georgia (Lugar Lab). Even Putin himself [declared](#) at the event of Valdai Club that "These developments (in Lugar Ceter) are very dangerous and are related to the latest achievements in genetics. On April 17, 2020 [briefing](#) Zakharova again attacked Lugar Lab and blamed Americans for trying to expand the scope of experimental activities there.

## China's Double Track Diplomacy against the US bio-labs: Disinformation Chaos

As for China, on April 29<sup>th</sup>, **Chinese media** outlets have issued Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson's, **Geng Shuang's allegations against the US-funded bio-labs** stationed in post-soviet states. Right after the expressed concerns coming from his Russian colleagues, [Geng accused the US government in misgivings regarding the labs' safety and functionality](#) as if "echoing" the discontent of the local population. He has not named particular biological centers, but considering his emphasis on a narrow geographical scope, we can deduce that the accusations were likewise directed against the Lugar laboratory. [Its efficient work has been once again proved during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, while rapidly identifying, transparently treating and addressing its spread all over the country.](#)

On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexandre Khvtisiashvili met with the Chinese Ambassador to Georgia Li Yan where they discussed the current accusations railing against the US-built Lugar Lab. The ambassador underscored that official China praises the effective work of the laboratory during the pandemic while [attributing the delusion on their local media](#). Both, **Georgian and Chinese parties have agreed on the Lugar Lab being the frequent target of Russian propaganda and disinformation mechanism, whilst dismissing China from the analogous actions.**

Domestically, pro-Russian media outlets are also consistently spreading disinformation about the Lugar Lab. In its latest [piece](#) on May, 4 Saqinform released an interview with its editor-in-chief **Arno Khidirbegishvili, who stated that Lugar Lab is a secret weapon of United States Army and its Georgian ownership and management is fictitious.**

## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

### Covid-19 related fake news

Americans are testing their medications in Georgia. News-Front's [article](#) about Remdesivir, an experimental drug produced by American company Gilead, which is currently being tested against coronavirus, accused the US of conducting experiments on Georgian citizens. The publication hints that Sovaldi, a medicine developed by the same company and provided by the US government to Georgia for the treatment of hepatitis C is dangerous. The author of the first [conspiracies](#) about Gilead's Sovaldi was Igor Giorgadze, the former Minister of Security of Georgia, upheld by [Vladimir Putin](#). Interestingly, Sovaldi has been registered in the Russian Federation as a

medication since 2016 and was included in the list of vital medications by the Russian government in 2019.

---

Covid-19 is affecting inter-state relations. Head of the Union of Human Rights Defenders and author of a handful of fake news [Nikoloz Mzhavanadze](#) promoted a crazy conspiracy [theory](#) that recent demonstrations in [Marneuli](#) against the economic hardships caused by the lockdown are part of Azerbaijan's plan to occupy the Kvemo Kartli region in the near future. Meanwhile, [Sputnik Georgia](#) predicted deterioration of China-Australia relations due to Australia's decision to back the US calls for an investigation into how the coronavirus outbreak in central China turned into a pandemic.

---

Socialism is more effective against Covid-19. On the 29th of April, [sputnik-Ossetia](#) scorned the Western countries with paid medical care, declaring that those states with a free medical system, like Russia, turned out to be more effective in fighting the pandemic. Valeri Kvaratskhelia, a news anchor of pro-Kremlin TV Obieqtivi, [voiced](#) the same narrative and praised Russia for fighting against the virus in a socialist way - treating the infected free of charge.

---

Covid-19 changes the world order. Based on a Russian website [fondsk.ru](#) [Geworld.ge](#) wrote an article about how coronavirus is reshaping the world. According to the report, the time of Pax Americana, NATO, and the European Union has expired, and Coronavirus is more reliable than the right to travel without a visa across the EU. The author tells a story of the Ukrainian citizens expelled from Germany and Poland and how they spent their nights on the border.

---

Coronavirus spread depends on ethnicity. Last week [Sputnik Georgia's](#) headline "Mortality from COVID-19 may be related to ethnicity: a British study" misled its readers into believing that the virus is affecting only people of a certain race. In reality, the authors of the study referenced in the article explain the difference in the death rate among the UK's various ethnic groups with both economic and social factors.

---

## 5G COVID-19 conspiracies grip Georgia

On social media, thousands of **Georgians have been discussing conspiracy theories about the alleged link between 5G technology and the spread of COVID-19.** The theories that mobile technology may pose a threat to health have

been circulating for years. Last year, [The New York Times reported](#) that Russian disinformation campaigns were exploiting 5G health fears. For the most part, those discussions remained fringe, garnering little engagement. The increased anxiety and confusion brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has catapulted some of those conspiracies into the mainstream.

From March 2020 onward, influential [celebrities](#) around the world have been spreading 5G coronavirus conspiracies to their millions of followers. False and misleading claims have led to material damage. **In the United Kingdom, cell towers were [set on fire](#) after the conspiracies spread. Similar acts of arson have been reported [in the Netherlands and Belgium](#).** Despite the [Facebook](#) and YouTube efforts to fight the conspiracy theory, in Georgia, 5G coronavirus conspiracies continue to spread online.

Much of the 5G coronavirus conspiracies **in Georgia have been fueled by a large Georgian Facebook group called “STOP 5G GEORGIA!!!,” which was created on April 7, 2020, and already has 13,436 members.** The Facebook group has expanded rapidly over the past few weeks. The total interactions with the group’s posts between at the end of April approached 126,000. The most interacted with pieces are statuses and photos shared to the group.

**Group members actively shared news of arson attacks on cell towers in different countries and endorsed those responsible for setting the towers on fire.** The group’s admins also focused on mobilizing and expanding its membership. In posts to the group, admins called on society to expand it by adding more people and taking on-the-ground action, such as organizing massive protests against 5G in Georgia. The 5G coronavirus conspiracies are a prime example of online disinformation leading to material damage. Read more on the topic in the [DFRLab research](#).

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### **“Daily Mail” accused of “fake news” by Irakli Sesiashvili**

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, a well-recognized British daily newspaper “Daily Mail” has published an article regarding the Maze group of hackers based in Georgia and affiliated with Kremlin and Russian security intelligence community that has leaked the information about the [COVID-19 medical trials from the British laboratories, demanding the £2 million from the UK in exchange of the data](#).

The Chairman of the Defence and Security Committee of the Parliament of Georgia and the member of the ruling party (GD), Mr. **Irakli Sesiashvili, expressed his discontent about this issue, blaming the British newspaper in the release of an**

**“unconfirmed” report.** He stated that Georgian state bodies had developed very close relations with British counterparts, who were very supportive when Russia attacked Georgia. Therefore, as he argued, it would be highly improbable that Georgian services would not have neglected any information of this kind. Mr. Sesiashvili expressed his strong belief that [Georgia has nothing to do with this negative event.](#)

It can be assumed that the Georgian intelligence services indeed lack the due diligence and were not aware of the Russian cyber-criminals’ concentration on the Georgian territory. On the other hand, one can also consider the unjustified and ambiguous **allegations against “Daily Mail” coming from Georgia’s ruling party member Irakli Sesiashvili as government’s intentional endorsement of Kremlin’s digital machinations maneuvered from Georgia.**

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab** conducted independent [research](#) of the assets removed from Facebook in April, connected to Espersona, a media organization owned by an individual with ties to the ruling Georgian Dream party. Facebook granted DFRLab access to a subset of 488 assets prior to their removal. The research encompassed inauthentic pages, groups, and fringe news agencies, all associated with Espersona, as well as 43 Instagram accounts linked to the network. It is worth noting here that Facebook has deleted [23 Facebook accounts, 80 Pages, 41 Groups, and 9 Instagram accounts associated with the opposition United National Movement party.](#)

**International Society For Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)** [identified](#) 12 inauthentic accounts disseminating "News-Front" content in different Facebook groups. Facebook removed them and the personal account of the administrator of the "News-Front" page as well. They were trying to encourage political polarization. ISFED [discovered](#) that the inauthentic accounts, which were disseminating "News-Front" content, were also involved in campaigns supporting the Pension Agency and Central Election Commission. According to ISFED, Facebook also deleted Facebook accounts and pages related to Sputnik, Georgia.

**Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)** published an [article](#) about the Georgian branch of a pro-Russian media outlet "News-Front". Even though Facebook deleted the "News-Front" Facebook page, the findings of GRASS show that "News-Front" is trying to renew its social media infrastructure. To this end, it is using various Facebook groups and Facebook pages of pro-Russian NGOs and newspapers, which were previously associated with "News-Front."

---

SUBSCRIBE HERE

---

*This newsletter is a part of the project „**Strengthening of the resilience of civil society organizations in Georgia against foreign malign influence**“, which is funded by the TRANSITION PROMOTION program of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

**TRANSITION**

Transition Promotion Program

---



**EUROPEAN  
VALUES**  
Protecting Freedom

*European Values Center for Security Policy  
is a non-governmental, non-partisan institute  
defending freedom and sovereignty*

---

Office +420 608 739 902  
E-mail [info@europeanvalues.net](mailto:info@europeanvalues.net)  
Web [www.europeanvalues.net](http://www.europeanvalues.net)

---

[Facebook.com/evropskehodnoty](https://www.facebook.com/evropskehodnoty)



**European Values Center for Security Policy**

[info@europeanvalues.net](mailto:info@europeanvalues.net)

[Unsubscribe](#)