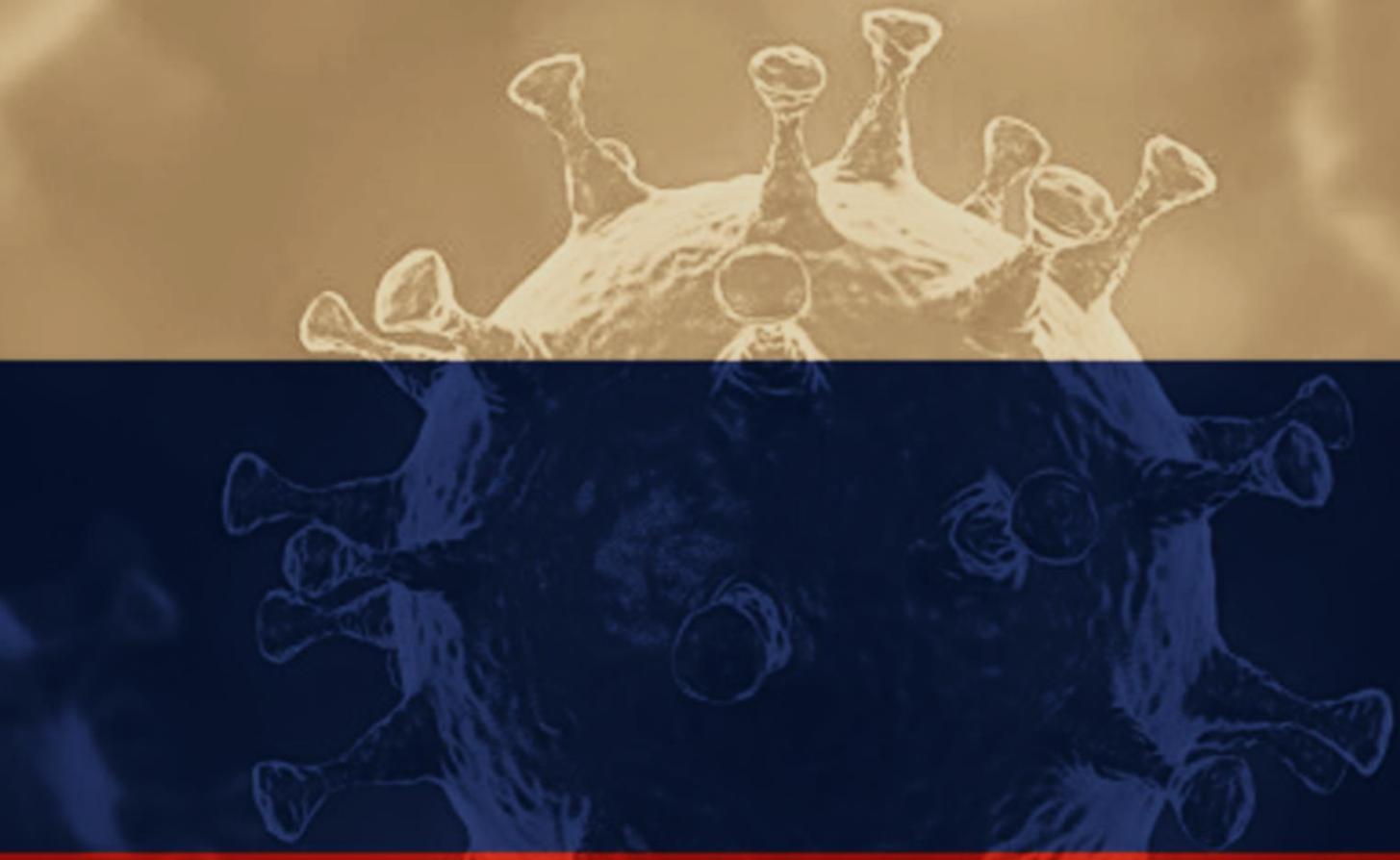


Disinfometer



Report on Russian disinformation about Covid-19

March - April 2020

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Introduction

Russia actively used disinformation amid the coronavirus pandemic to confuse and mislead Western democratic societies. The European Union and the United States officially blamed the Kremlin for dissemination disinformation. Anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation was also actively promoted in Georgia.

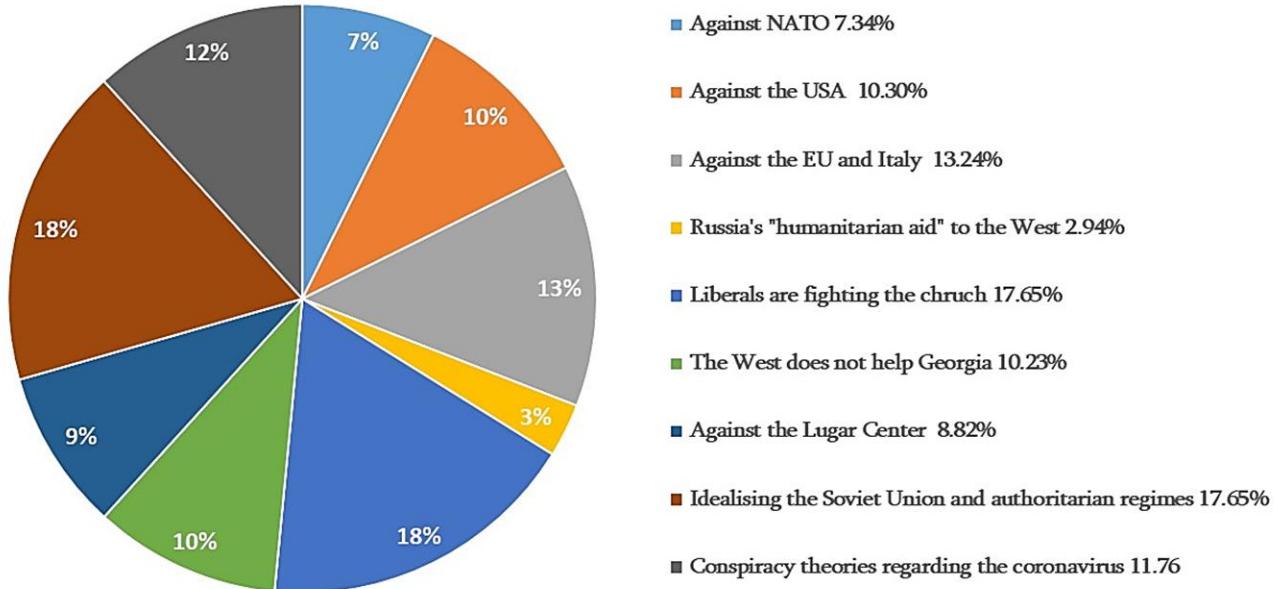
This publication aims to analyse messages of disinformation sources amid the coronavirus pandemic and inform readers about the trends in their discourses.

The report offers a review of the messages produced by anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation promoting media between March-April 2020. As a part of the monitoring, eight online media and four Facebook pages have been studied with distinguished anti-Western inclinations. Selection was based on FactCheck Georgia's regular monitoring. In total, the monitoring identified 217 items (articles, videos, photos, Facebook posts) and 68 are included in this report. This publication overviews those materials which were most clear-cut within the pro-Russian and anti-Western media discourse and had a campaign-like dissemination. As a result of the monitoring, six major clusters used by anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation to promote manipulative messages have been identified.

The Facebook social analytics tool CrowdTangle was used to measure the dissemination of disinformation within the social network.

Main Findings

Disinformation by its targets



Disinformation against the NATO

- NATO acts aggressively even amid the world pandemic and holds exercises in the Black Sea.
- NATO's attention to Georgia amid the pandemic and the alliance's warships visiting the Poti seaport indicates that it is not Georgia which needs NATO, but NATO uses Georgia for its own needs.

Disinformation against the USA

- The coronavirus is a US-made artificial biological weapon to win a trade war against China.
- American troops in Wuhan spread the coronavirus as early as in October 2019.
- The virus is a US-made “bacteriological weapon” and was used against those countries which the Pentagon says pose threats to the USA. These countries are as follows: Threat N1 – China, Threat N2 – Russia and Threat N3 – Iran.

Disinformation against the European Union

- The EU did not help Italy and abandoned it whilst Russia and China appeared to be Italy's only true friends.
- The Schengen zone does not exist which means the dissolution of the EU. The EU cannot be restored even after the pandemic and, therefore, Georgia should not strive towards EU and NATO membership.
- As a result of the EU's feebleness vis-à-vis the coronavirus, most Georgian citizens are starting to have a negative attitude towards the EU.
- With sanctions imposed against Russia and Iran, the EU impedes these countries in fighting the coronavirus.

Idealization of Soviet Union and authoritarian systems

- In the Soviet Union, hygiene was observed and homosexuality was condemned which hampered the outbreaks of pandemics.
- As a result of the weakness of the European education system, European countries cannot deal with the pandemic whilst Georgia and other post-Soviet countries, including Russia, are successfully handling the coronavirus owing to Soviet medicine.
- The socialist and the Chinese models are effective in containing the pandemic whilst the Western, democratic and capitalist systems have failed.

Disinformation against the Lugar Center

- A secret laboratory of the US Armed Forces, which works to create hazardous pathogens and biological weapons, is located in the Lugar Centre.
- The Georgian leadership of the Lugar Centre is incompetent and the American side does not provide them with real information about the coronavirus.

Pro-Russian media campaign on “liberals assaulting” the church

- NGOs seek to use the coronavirus to ban services in churches and discredit the Patriarch.
- The West provides help to Georgia in exchange for “fighting the Church.”

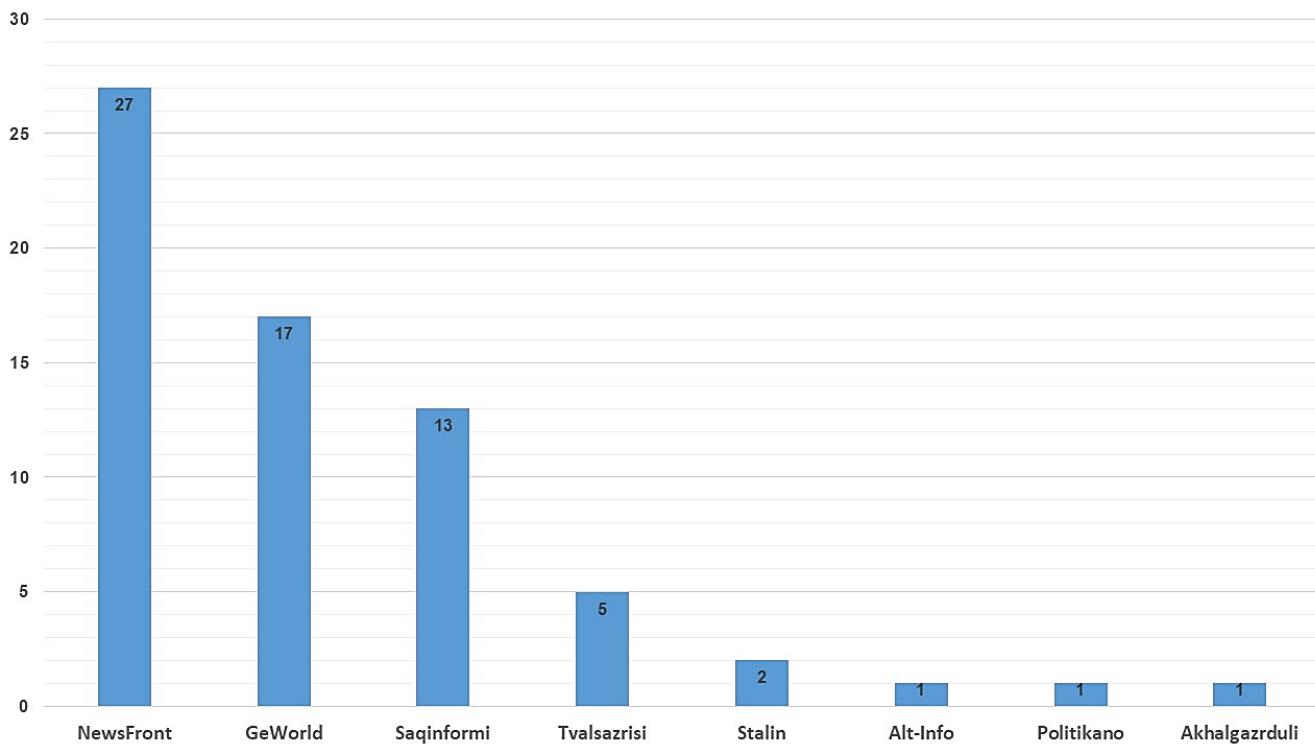
- Ruling liberal elites pursue an anti-Church orientation and fight the Church. The authorities planned to launch mass testing after Easter to blame the Church for the rising number of confirmed cases.
- It was planned to test-run 5G towers on the Easter week-end which would have damaged the health of people inside churches and eventually the Church would have been blamed.

Disinformation campaign: “The West does not help Georgia”

- Georgia does not need Europe and America since Georgia’s “lifeline” goes through Russia.
- The coronavirus demonstrates that Georgia cannot live without Russia.
- American assistance to Georgia is marginal.
- Georgia received medical assistance from China and not from the West. Georgian doctors should count on support from their Russian colleagues as well.

Disinformation by initial disseminating sources

P.S This report does not include sources which Facebook removed at the end of April 2020



Disinformation against the NATO

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, pro-Russian media vigorously continued a negative campaign against NATO. According to the [article](#) published by *Georgia and the World*, NATO is an aggressive international actor which contributes to regional tensions by conducting military exercises: "[Amid the pandemic at a videoconference between leaders of NATO member states] seemingly they had time to threaten others and twist someone's ear. They glanced forward and stated that they would stand next to us and hold a joint Ukraine-Georgia exercise in the Black Sea. But for what? For whom?"

Saqinform also dedicated an article to NATO-Georgia relations amid the pandemic. Arno Khidirbegishvili has a negative [opinion](#) of NATO ships visiting the Poti seaport and claims that Tbilisi gets no benefit from a partnership with the alliance as NATO is exploiting Georgia. According to the article, holding exercises in light of the pandemic indicates that in fact "it is not the Government of Georgia which asks for NATO membership but it is the alliance itself which does not give a break to the Government of Georgia because it is not Georgia which needs NATO, but it is NATO which needs Georgia." The article was initially [published](#) on a partner media platform, News Front. Saqinform's Editor-in-Chief, Arno Khidirbegishvili, reiterated the same in his next [article](#): "In the nearest future, at least 14,000 military service members without face masks will pour out onto Georgia from the skies like God's punishment and the majority of them will probably be infected by the coronavirus."

Valeri Kvaratskhelia also commented on the visit of NATO ships to Georgia. In his [interview](#) with News Front, he stated: "Why are you dragging these ships up and down, who do you threaten and who do you frighten? And what benefit does it give to move these pieces of junk up and down? Someone will open up a test tube in any military-biological laboratory and not even seven walnuts will survive out of seven billion on this sinful planet."

Disinformation against the USA

As part of the monitoring, multiple attempts of the pro-Russian media were identified to use the coronavirus issue against the USA.

ProgressNews published an [article](#) based on a Russian [source](#) where the author links the coronavirus pandemic to the US-China trade war. According to the article, “[Indian] scientists conclude that COVID-19 is a man-made virus and it was created by the United States to wage biological warfare against China.” The article also reads that according to the aforementioned scientists: “The virus outbreak inflicted tremendous damage to the Chinese economy and sharply undermined China’s positions in trade negotiations.”

“The coronavirus is a bacteriological weapon and only leaders of a few countries together with Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II possess information about this.”

News Front’s published an [interview](#) with pro-Russian Saqinform’s Editor-in-Chief, Arno Khidirbegishvili, on the same subject. In his interview, Mr Khidirbegishvili claimed that the “coronavirus is a bacteriological weapon” and only leaders of a few countries together with the Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II possess [information](#) about that.” As he further stated: “Several days prior to the world being informed about the coronavirus, he [Ilia II] stated in his Sunday service that only few days remain before the Second Coming....” According to the interview, a handful of countries (the US, the UK and China, but not Russia) may be blamed for the creation of the “coronavirus bacteriological weapon:” “[The virus] was used against those countries which based on the Pentagon’s conclusion pose a threat to the USA. These countries are as follows: Threat N1 – China, Threat N2 – Russia and Threat N3 – Iran.”

The day after the publication of Arno Khidirbegishvili’s interview, News Front opened a new front against the USA and again [blamed](#) US troops for spreading the coronavirus in Wuhan. This narrative is [based](#) on an allegation voiced by the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

alleging that the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan could have taken place during the 2019 Military World Games caused by the American troops. Disinformation was also promoted earlier by the pro-Russian media, although News Front's article on 25 March 2020 expands it further. This time, the attack against the US is linked to the detection of the coronavirus among the troops of the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier. This, according to the article, "provides yet another indirect example of proof that "corona" is an American military virus...."

Pro-Russian Saqinform and News Front also spearheaded an anti-American information campaign in regard to the "coronavirus tests" as well. After the USA purchased some coronavirus testing swabs from Italy, the aforementioned agencies manipulatively reported the story: "American predators left Italians without coronavirus test-kits." According to the article, this "act of sabotage" was accomplished with the help of the "fifth column" in Italy and Washington has such groups in every NATO country, certainly including "enslaved" countries like Georgia. Arno Khidirbegishvili thinks that Georgia should not perceive the USA as a strategic partner and should not expect any serious assistance from it: "The authorities, mouth wide open, are looking at the "strategic partner" and expecting something from it. America will not spare "nappies" again, please, you can rest assured of this!" In addition, it is striking that the anti-American information campaign was carried out simultaneously with Russia delivering humanitarian aid to Italy whilst information on this issue was manipulatively reported in many countries.

Disinformation against the European Union

In order to discredit Georgia's Euro-integration, News Front blamed the EU-Georgia Association Agreement for the coronavirus outbreak in Georgia based on information published in the social media by the Founder of the Eurasian Institute, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze. Furthermore, Mr Rtskhiladze sought to persuade readers that most Georgians were starting to develop a negative attitude towards the EU as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

"The main "achievement" for Georgia from the Association Agreement with the EU is the coronavirus."

In the course of the monitoring, the pro-Russian media also actively sought to promote a narrative on the collapse and the weakening of the EU. *Georgia and the World* claimed that the Schengen area ceased to exist after the decision of the EU countries to shut their borders which implies a disintegration of the EU. Moreover, the same media argued that the EU will not be restored even after the pandemic and, as a result, Georgia should stop its integration with NATO and the EU.

Georgia and the World also commented on the EU's condemning of the decision of Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, to seize extraordinary power by declaring an indefinite state of emergency. The newspaper criticised the EU and named Orban's conservatism, anti-globalism, Euroscepticism and fight against George Soros as the real reasons behind the criticism of the Hungarian Prime Minister. *Georgia and the World*'s narrative meticulously coincides with the Kremlin's narrative which argues that the criticism directed at Orban's powers is fake news disseminated by globalists. Russian propaganda on the aforementioned subject is frequently promoted at *Sputnik*, *Tass* and *Russia Today* (see link 1, link 2, link 3 and link 4).

According to another of News Front's disinformation messages, "the EU impedes the fight against the coronavirus in the world." As an argument, the propagandist media manipulatively used the statement of the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, where he urged G20 nations to lift sanctions on certain countries.

Disinformation against the Italy

On 22 March 2020, Russia started to deliver humanitarian aid to Italy in operation which came to be called "From Russia with Love." The Kremlin used the sending of humanitarian aid for PR and propaganda purposes. Russian propaganda on this issue was also

"The EU abandoned Italy and Italians are replacing the EU flag with the Russian one."

promoted in Georgia. It took a campaign-like form, aiming to draw Russia in a positive light and discredit the EU.

According to News Front, Italians are replacing the EU's flag with the Russian one. Similar information was reported by *Georgia and the World* which stated that the EU ostensibly abandoned Italy to its fate whilst Russia, together with China and Cuba, extended the helping hand. In his interview with *Georgia and the World*, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze claimed that the EU allocated funds to fight the coronavirus although Italy has not received any of this assistance. Mr Rtskhiladze also claimed that Germany stopped the export of technologies and medicine to Italy and refused to help whilst China and Russia sent humanitarian aid to the Italians.

Idealization of Soviet Union and authoritarian systems

Saqinform used the outbreak of COVID-19 to idealise the Soviet Union. According to Arno Khidirbegishvili, the healthcare system and hygiene in the Soviet Union were so well-organized that similar diseases did not spread. Mr Khidirbegishvili also praised the Soviet system for condemning homosexuality and stated that ignoring personal hygiene rules as well as homosexual acts were one of the reasons behind the outbreak of the pandemic.

Saqinform's editor-in-chief also argued that COVID-19 was created in the USA and launched in China. Mr Khidirbegishvili stated that as early as in 1991, the USA spread COVID-91 in the Soviet Union which harmed brains, not lungs, and as a result the USSR was dissolved and the "memory of Stalin's glorious deeds" vanished. Mr Khidirbegishvili opines that people lived friendly for 70 years in the USSR whilst Georgia was turned into a US colony after gaining independence with US Ambassador, Kelly Degnan, as its real ruler.

"The socialist systems and not the capitalist systems effectively handled the coronavirus."

Georgia and the World was also prolific in its articles on the Soviet past and the positive role of its legacy. The newspaper's article, "Triumph of People who Bought Degrees or What Does COVID-19 Tribulation Teach Us?", named Europe's bad education system as the reason behind the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting troubles in Europe. The article also claimed that Georgia has been successful because of Amiran Gamkrelidze, Tengiz Tservadze and Marina Ezugbaia were Soviet-educated. It also ascribes the qualification of Chinese and Cuban healthcare workers to the Soviet Union whilst the collapse of the Soviet Union and making emphasis on the West, English and computer literacy is argued to be Georgia's mistake.

According to this narrative, it was the coronavirus which demonstrated the superiority of the Soviet education system over that of the Western one. News Front also explained the low numbers of people infected or killed by the coronavirus in CIS countries as compared to EU member states and the USA owing to Soviet medicine. In addition, News Front blamed the EU, not China, for spreading the coronavirus in CIS member nations. *Georgia and the World* also highlighted the medicine left by the Soviet Union "which is still better than contemporary Western medicine" and stated that the coronavirus was a certain test and exam which "illustrated the immoral face of the West."

In yet another of *Georgia and the World's* articles, entitled "Is the Coronavirus a Disease or a Final Warning for the Offspring of Adam and Eve?", the author, Davit Mkheidze, indirectly claims that the coronavirus hit Western countries particularly severely because of their support of the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, Mr Mkheidze also blames "neoliberals" in fighting against the Orthodox Church at the pretext of the coronavirus. The author opined that restrictions imposed by the authorities were senseless as well as holding elections in October and spending money for that purpose.

Georgia and the World, based on the Russian propaganda media (ria.ru), made a conclusion that the Chinese model is superior as compared to the Western political system of governance because, in contrast to the West, China acted more effectively and succeeded in overcoming the crisis. In addition, according to *Georgia and the World*, Italy's decision to ask China and Russia for help

illustrates the weakness of democratic rule and the superiority of Soviet approaches. Therefore, the newspaper claims that it is a socialist system and not a capitalist system which is better suited to handle the coronavirus. Saqinform's Editor-in-Chief, Arno Khidirbegishvili, also underlined the weakness of democracy in his [article](#), entitled "Let Saakashvili Take Georgian Sonder-emigrants with Him, in Kyiv, Instead of Sending Them to Tbilisi!" According to News Front, Georgians are running away from Europe and the USA, but not from Russia, because "Georgians are counting less on medical assistance in Europe and America." Based on this, News Front concludes that in order to redirect people working in Europe to Russia, national-level negotiations should be held with Moscow to enable the legal movement of the Georgian workforce to Russia.

The Politicano Facebook page also offered a manipulative insight in regard to the coronavirus pandemic. Politicano posted a [photo](#) with the following caption: "USA: Giving USD 1.5 Trillion to Banks, UK: Tries to Form a "Herd Immunity," Italy: Collapsed. In contrast: China: Builds Hospitals, Cuba: Hands Out Antiviral Drugs, Vietnam: Created Fast Tests for the Coronavirus, North Korea: Checks Travellers' Health. Healthcare is Properly Done Only Under Socialism!" *News Front* also published the aforementioned Facebook [post](#).

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 აზერბაიჯანის საავადყოფო კომისია

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 ჰადიაბენ სირია მხოლოდ სოციალიზმი



Disinformation against the Lugar Center

The Lugar Centre has been targeted by Russian propaganda for years. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, pro-Russian media outlets have advanced their efforts to promote conspiracy theories and fake news about the Lugar Centre. Pro-Russian sources openly blame the West for [artificially creating the coronavirus](#) and claim that it is a [secret biological weapon](#) produced in military-biological laboratories.

The pro-Russian online media outlet, News Front, published an article entitled “The Coronavirus Did Not Originate in China! Hello, Lugar Laboratory!” Their accusation is based on the version promoted by the Chinese. The spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lijian Zhao, stated on Twitter on 12 March 2020 that the coronavirus (CoVid-19) originated not in China’s Wuhan but in the USA and spread from there. On 13 March, in a subsequent tweet, the Chinese diplomat shared an article written by the Global Research Centre (a pseudo-scientific think-tank which circulates conspiracy theories) and asked people to repost it. In the same article, based on the Global Research Centre, News Front argues: “Since there were 1,059 cases of a leakage of pathogens from US secret laboratories from 2005 to 2012, the aforementioned explanation is getting increasingly credible.” It also mentions the Lugar Centre in this context. In another article, published in the same period, News Front sought to denigrate the importance of the Lugar Centre whilst, on the other hand, expressing suspicions in regard to its real functions.

“Americans are working to create and modify different pathogens of hazardous diseases in the reference laboratories of third countries, including for military purposes.”

The Georgia-based pro-Russian media provided immediate coverage of the statements made by Maria Zakharova, Spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs, who was very active in her comments about the Lugar Centre. As stated by Ms Zakharova, Americans visited Georgia in April and offered the country’s authorities to expand the ongoing clandestine research and activities at the Lugar Centre. She also added that the USA creates dual-use biological research laboratories on the pretext of fighting bioterrorism in the former Soviet countries: “We cannot rule out that the Americans are working to create and modify different pathogens of hazardous diseases in the reference laboratories of third countries, including for military purposes.” Apart from the Lugar Centre itself, disinformation also targeted its leadership. The pro-Russian media cast doubts on both the motives and the competence of the head of the Lugar Centre.

Pro-Russian media campaign on “liberals assaulting” the church

Appealing to the Church with the request to hold Easter liturgies and other holidays without parishioners was portrayed by pro-Russian sources as “liberal propaganda” as well as “liberals and the West” assaulting the Church.

“Closed churches are what Western liberals dream about and the West provides help to Georgia in exchange for fighting against the Church.”

- Priest Giorgi Razmadze: Closed churches are what Western liberals **dream** about.
- According to the **article** of *Georgia and the World*, NGOs sought to use the coronavirus to ban church services and discredit the Patriarch.
- **According** to News Front, mass media prepared an Easter assault against the Church.
- According to the narrative of *Georgia and the World*, liberals are **fighting** the Church because they sought to restrict church attendance on the pretext of health reasons.
- News Front claimed that “**liberal-fascist mass media’s anti-Church propaganda**” was under way.
- The Stalin Facebook page: “The International Monetary Fund and the EU **provide help** to Georgia in exchange for “fighting against the Church.”
- The Stalin Facebook page: “Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and the Director of the NCDC, Amiran Gamkrelidze, **confronted** the Patriarch and his Locum Tenens Shio.
- News Front: The United National Movement and the Georgian Dream both **have** anti-Church orientation and are fighting against the Church.
- The leader of the pro-Kremlin political party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, on air on TV Obiektivi, **stated**: “I cannot recall that any of the priests were infected after communion.” This indirect call to attend church services was made against the recommendations issued by the Ministry of Health.

Conspiracy theories have also emerged on this subject:

- Authorities will start mass testing after Easter and **blame** parishioners for the rising number of infections.
- Authorities lost control over the pandemic and **try** to blame the Church for this.
- It is a 99% chance that the number of infected people will increase after Easter and the authorities have an **evil-minded intention** to **blame it on the Church**.

- Testing of 5G towers is expected over the Easter week-end and as a result, the health of people in the churches will also be harmed. To avoid blaming the Church for people getting ill, believers have to turn off their cell phones and Wi-Fi routers.
- A petition was made to the Government of Georgia to ban the implementation of 5G technologies on the ground of being a “health hazard.”

Disinformation campaign: The West does not help Georgia

The West allegedly abandoning Georgia during the coronavirus pandemic-induced crisis was yet another narrative promoted by pro-Russian groups in Georgia.

Georgia and the World claimed that the USA does not need Georgia and argued that Georgia should not pin its hopes on Europe and the USA: “[Georgia’s vital lifeline goes through Russia](#)” since Georgia is dependent on food; particularly, wheat imports from Russia.”

“Georgia cannot count on the West because ‘Georgia’s lifeline’ goes through Russia.”

Saqinform’s editor-in-chief, in his [article](#) entitled “The Coronavirus COVID-19 Will Show Whether or Not Georgia Can Survive Without Russia,” wrote that “Georgia’s Western strategic partners stopped asking Russia to withdraw troops from Georgia out of fear that Georgia might have asked them for financial assistance as well. However, after the Ivanishvili’s Cartu Fund stated that it was going to allocate unlimited financial assistance, the Western partners again became outspoken. This article was also [published](#) in News Front’s Russian edition. Arno Khidirbegishvili said that the USA’s statement on assistance was a form of [pressure](#) not to settle relations with Abkhazians and Russians.

In addition, *Georgia and the World* [argued](#) that the USA’s assistance to Georgia was marginal as compared to pay checks allocated for American citizens. Furthermore, in his [interview](#) with *Georgia and the World*, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze criticised the USA and Congressman Adam Kinzinger because the latter does not raise the issue of helping Georgia in the American Congress. According to *Georgia and the World*, Europe and the USA allocated large sums for different countries to fight the coronavirus although “Georgia was not mentioned among those countries.”

News Front published a China-supporting article which incorporates both Russian disinformation against the Lugar Centre and the Chinese narrative – “It is not Lugar which Helps, it is China!” The article also reads that Georgian doctors should also count on serious help from Russian colleagues.

Propaganda on Russia sending “humanitarian aid” to the USA

On 1 April 2020 Russia sent “humanitarian aid” to the USA to fight the coronavirus. Moscow used this fact for propaganda purposes and promoted its mass dissemination with the hashtag #Russiahelps in social networks. News Front and *Georgia and the World* reproduced Russia’s propaganda messages in Georgia.

Conspiracy theories

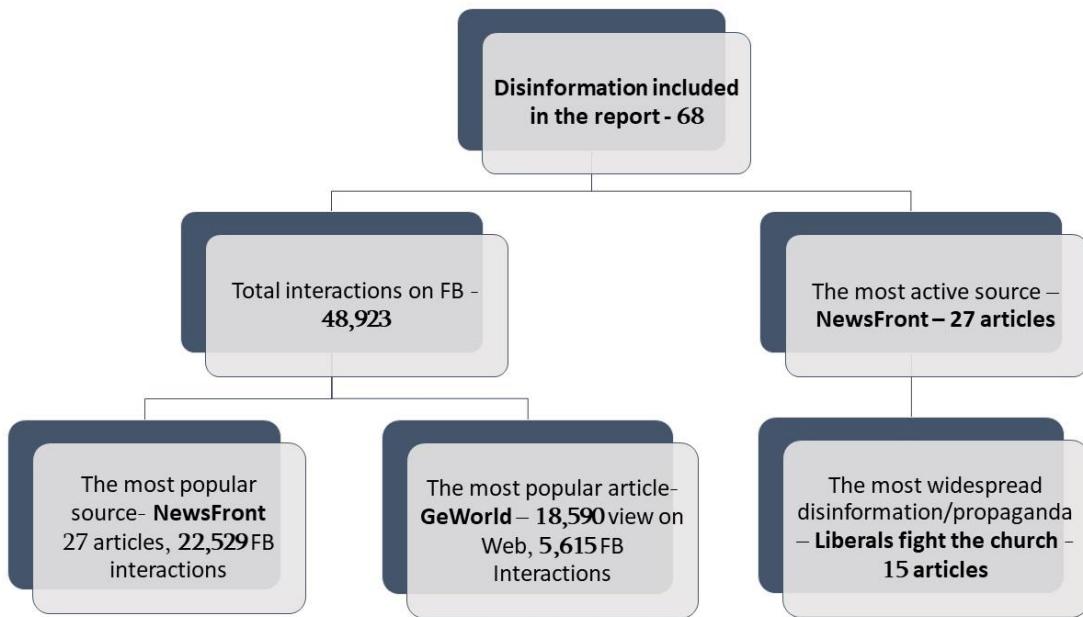
Of the many notable conspiracy theories which mushroomed amid the pandemic, the most notable is that the Earth is ruled by dynasties of Jewish origin and one of their main goals is to shrink mankind by 50%, inventing deadly diseases and viruses for this purpose.

There were attempts to mislead the public with the theory that the coronavirus is not as dangerous as reported. According to the pro-Russian media, the coronavirus is man-made, supposedly invented for the following goals: the depopulation of the Earth, total control, causing a world economic crisis, the establishment of a world government, increased debts for people and states, the abolition of cash, the manipulation with prices on different shares, sowing fear and chaos, supporting the pharmaceutical business, universal vaccination, subjugation of religions and “implanting microchips” in people. Bill Gates was also frequently blamed for the coronavirus outbreak.

“Under universal and mandatory vaccinations, Western globalists are going to implant microchips in people.”

News Front decried the lockdown in Georgia – imposed to prevent the spread of infection – as a “[Satanic dictatorship](#).” In addition, information containing fake medical advice and means of treatment, such as the [Artemisia plant being a remedy for the coronavirus](#), was actively circulating.

Statistics of the main actors



Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) is a non-partisan, non-governmental policy watchdog and multi-profile think-tank which was established in October 2012. GRASS conducts research and in-depth analysis of Georgia's foreign, security, public policy and public administration fields together with