

Is Russia Exploiting Coronavirus Fears in Georgia?

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Kremlin believed to be fuelling social media efforts to stoke paranoia.

Experts warn that Russia is exploiting the recent appearance of coronavirus in Georgia to spread a new wave of disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Georgia has registered only 15 confirmed cases to date, brought into the country by citizens who returned from travels abroad in high-risk countries such as Italy.

Nonetheless, the widespread fear surrounding the virus, known formally as COVID-19, has been exacerbated by online misinformation campaigns.

Many researchers believe that Russia is trying to increase this traffic in Georgia, having already been active in fuelling anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. Some link this directly to the country's measles outbreak last year.

A **study** published by the **American Public Health Association** in October 2018 found that Russian trolls and Twitter bots were weaponising anti-vaccine messages as part of Russia's foreign policy - supported by its intelligence services - in order to influence so-called Western values.

(See **Georgia: Is Russia Weaponising The Anti-Vax Movement?**)

Nino Topuridze, who recently covered Russia's anti-vaccination disinformation campaign for IWPR, explained that anti-vaccination groups on social media have actively spread the lie that the coronavirus has been invented by pharmaceutical companies for financial gain.

"The main idea within these Facebook groups is that this virus was created on purpose so that companies can then create a vaccine and sell it on a world-wide level," she said. "As sources, these groups use unreliable information or outlets which claim that this or that country has created the vaccine. They are also creating petitions of people against vaccines and, at the same time, spreading the information that vaccines are a biological weapon that are actively killing millions of people."

Anti-vaccination groups have also been quick to spread the theory that governments will use this crisis as an excuse to violate civil rights and enforce mandatory vaccinations.

Russia has also revived conspiracy theories around the Lugar Laboratory, a US financed high-tech research centre in Tbilisi.

Over the years, Russian authorities and media have worked to discredit the lab and US-Georgia relations more widely.

Previous disinformation **about the Lugar Lab** has ranged from describing it as a military biological base focused on attacking Russia, to allegations that it is conducting secret experiments on humans and animals and that those living nearby are at a high risk of contamination.

The efforts appear to have had some success; when a **2019 poll by the National Democratic Institute** (NDI) asked Georgians whether they thought it was true that the lab had caused the spread of epidemics, 21 per cent agreed and 40 per cent said that they "did not know".

The Lugar Lab is currently constantly in the news because it handles the testing of samples for the virus, allowing those with an interest in spreading disinformation to exploit its new public profile.

Eto Buziashvili, an expert on disinformation working for the Digital Forensic Research Lab in Georgia, explained the purpose of such campaigns.

"The main goals of spreading the disinformation narratives about the bioweapons and American laboratories are to damage the US image in the international arena, which will make Georgian society question its strategic partner and sow distrust between the two," she said. "At the same time, disinformation around the Lugar laboratory will create confusion in Georgia about whether to trust the lab and as a result, have fewer people vaccinated and break society's resilience."

Sophie Gelava, another expert on disinformation at the Media Development Fund, said that the Kremlin had become expert in maximising the impact of such events.

“We have observed that Kremlin-linked agencies share years-old articles on the Lab on their Facebook pages,” she continued. “Their strategy is to recycle old disinformation. For example, Facebook page Stalin shared a 2014 article...with the headline, ‘What caused the sudden spread of viruses in Georgia and does the Lugar laboratory pose a threat to the country?’ thus creating artificial links between the recent cases of coronavirus and the Lab.”

Gelava explained that the public was particularly vulnerable to misinformation about health issues.

“The problem with health-related propaganda is that it is difficult to break through the circle of conspiracy, because the facts debunking conspiracies are portrayed as yet more proof of the conspiracy,” she said, adding that there the public should be vigilant for particular features that indicated stories were not based in fact. “The signs to watch out for are hyperbolic language, the absence of a source, not evidence-based, lacking information on research methodology, sample size, etc.”

The spread of the coronavirus has also affected relations between Georgia and Abkhazia. The de facto republic, which broke away from the country after a 1990s war but remains largely unrecognised by the international community, closed its crossings with Georgia – but not with Russia.

Nino Kalandarishvili, who chairs the board of the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts (ISNC) said that there was a clear political motive for such actions.

“The fact is that this time it’s restricting the spread of the coronavirus that is used as an excuse for closing the checkpoints and the local populations have accepted this calmly,” she said. “It’s interesting, however, that there has been no discussion about closing the border with Russia. I think that this situation, the closing of the checkpoints with the logic of preventing a pandemic or epidemic is not so much about protecting the local population as it is a political move, especially in light of ongoing political processes in Abkhazia.”

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