

# COVID-19 – Impact of Disinformation on Georgian Society

**Zaza Tsojniashvili**

*Professor*

*Caucasus International University*

*Georgia*

## **ABSTRACT**

Disinformation and malign influence in Georgia, both internal and external, draws heavily on psychological drivers of human behavior to exploit and manipulate. Essentially, similar to the strategy the advertising world has adopted, disinformation's strategy is to change perceptions and, ultimately, manipulate social behavior. Its goal is to shift attitudes, perceptions, values, and norms. Georgia's current adversaries deploy their information operations to undermine the resilience of Georgia's democratic institutions, its social cohesion and impede the formation of inclusive national identity. While there is broad consensus that disinformation and malign influence has devastating effects on democracy worldwide, it is more challenging to measure the direct impact that disinformation may have in discrediting political opponents or inducing voter apathy. Public opinion surveys provide some insight into whether or not key narratives spread through disinformation have taken root – which appears to be the case – but they are imprecise in measuring to what extent the disinformation efforts have indeed contributed to their prevalence and how.

**Key words:** Disinformation, Propaganda, Covid-19, Georgia, Media literacy.

## **GİRİŞ**

Disinformation and malign influence in Georgia, both internal and external, draws heavily on psychological drivers of human behavior to exploit and manipulate. Essentially, similar to the strategy the advertising world has adopted, disinformation's strategy is to change perceptions and, ultimately, manipulate social behavior. Its goal is to shift attitudes, perceptions, values, and norms. Georgia's current adversaries deploy their information operations to undermine the resilience of Georgia's democratic institutions, its social cohesion and impede the formation of inclusive national identity. While there is broad consensus that disinformation and malign influence has devastating effects on democracy worldwide, it is more challenging to measure the direct impact that disinformation may have in discrediting political opponents or inducing voter apathy. Public opinion surveys provide some insight into whether or not key narratives spread through disinformation have taken root – which appears to be the case – but they are imprecise in measuring to what extent the disinformation efforts have indeed contributed to their prevalence and how.

Since the coronavirus outbreak started, digital media have been both the culprits of and antidotes to disinformation. For many governments around the world, priority COVID-19 actions included measures that reflected the heightened importance of combating fake news, such as (a) criminalizing malicious coronavirus falsehood (Hungary, South Africa), (b) establishing special units to combat disinformation (e.g., EU, UK), and (c) providing guidance to social media companies on taking down contentious pandemic content (e.g., India). To counter the “infodemic,” 18 governments have added counter-measures via decrees and emergency legislation. The dismissive “fake news” discourse promoted by many politicians—legitimizing an offensive against independent journalism since 2016—has framed the legal responses to the COVID-19 disinformation, further eroding trust in the watchdog function of the media. [1]

The popularity of online media has enabled disinformation to spread quickly, creating a worldwide problem. The pandemic, with life and death consequences, has shown the necessity of countering disinformation. Nations are not just fighting an epidemic, they are fighting an “infodemic.” Fake news

spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous. Pro-Kremlin media often claims the coronavirus was manufactured in a secret laboratory. The Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research in Georgia, which has been working for public health and safety since it opened in 2011, is a constant target of disinformation. Like the pandemic itself, the digital outbreak of disinformation is global. Disinformation around COVID-19 has real consequences. Disinformation is not just a potential health risk when false cures are propagated. The spread of false information pertaining to the 5G network has led to multiple arson attacks on telecommunication infrastructure across Europe. The work of independent media and fact-checkers who deliver reliable and authoritative information is crucial; and yet they face threats and harassment. The rise of pro-Russian disinformation about the global pandemic reached its peak around March and April 2020 with inaccurate messages about the source of coronavirus and the development and testing of a potential vaccine. Facebook groups are a powerful hub for the spread of such messages.

While the latest poll by the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Center for Insights in Survey Research shows a temporary increase in public trust in the government's performance on COVID-19 and a small increase in positive views of the country's trajectory since IRI's last poll, public opinion is still hardly favorable; In October 2019, 78 percent of citizens thought Georgia was headed in the wrong direction, while 64 percent think so today. In fact, according to IRI, the majority of citizens have thought that the country is headed in the "wrong direction" for a while now: the figure has not dropped below 60% in the last 5 years. [2]

Georgia needs to work longer-term to build the evidence-base concerning the stratification and behavior of the society: what motivates or inhibits knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and perceptions, what sways perceived social norms and power relationships, impedes self-efficacy and contributes to the shaping (or un-shaping) of values and norms? Accordingly, while Georgian civil Society has done an excellent job understanding what disinformation is and how it is spread. CSOs are making headway in keeping the society alert about this threat, it still lacks a concrete means to assess, address and combat what disinformation actually does and to subsequently address and counter its effects, rather than simply its messages. To achieve tangible results, the behavioral "triggers" that the disinformation effort is using most successfully need to be scrutinized, and the ensuing harmful impact counteracted, especially in respect to specific vulnerable segments of Georgia's population. This could be key to shaping a longer-term strategy that builds the skills of citizens to detect and dismiss disinformation, but to also taps into the growing evidence that initiatives that generate discussion on the drivers of disinformation, work to shape identity, increase efficacy, prompt social agency and political participation bring more sustainable results in building resilience towards hostile information operations in the long run. We must face it: rebuilding the trust and legitimacy that has been undermined – among others – through disinformation is quite a long-term process. What it needs is a proactive, creative and innovative collective approach by the media and civil society that would highlight Georgia's historic attachment to democratic values and connect them to its future in a compelling way that resonates with audiences. Thus Georgia's own, democratic narrative can become the core of its resilience and inoculate the whole segments of society against the seductive and divisive messages of disinformation, pumped out en masse. To have any notable impact on societal resilience to disinformation, Georgian civil society needs to more explicitly link up its current work on building awareness about disinformation and on exposing its most blatant cases, with more traditional effort of fostering a consensus around the country's democratic future. Why? Because a significant number of citizens must feel confident about their country and its institutions to discard the most brazen forms of disinformation, while the fact-checkers could weed out finer manipulations and the educators address the core beliefs. While building a basis of democratic consensus may not be a "silver bullet", it is an essential foundation for countering disinformation.

However unfortunate, the malignant information operations are only set to grow in sophistication and breadth. Through the use of carefully calibrated artificial intelligence (AI) that exploits social media bias, the disinformation agents will seek to further compound polarization and exploit vulnerabilities, leveraging weaknesses in human psychology, gaps in knowledge, and hardship that breeds grievances to further destabilize, aggravate and demoralize the Georgian society. Yet the current approach of Georgian civil society is often short-term in scope, insufficiently uncoordinated, under-funded, reactive, and neither sets the agenda in wider public discussion nor counters the longer-term damage on voter behavior. A number of Georgian NGOs are running discrete campaigns to counter disinformation such as

fact-checking and myth-busting, media literacy, and making a political ads library available for Georgia.

The vulnerability to Russian pressure – both through the context of the ongoing military occupation of Georgian territories, and the degree of popular receptiveness to Russian narratives – combined with low institutional resilience, marked by the lack of national cohesion, is considerable enough for Moscow to pursue the objective of “state capture”. Georgia’s task is to limit its key vulnerabilities – especially in terms of receptiveness to the Russian narrative, and to shore up national cohesion and institutional resilience. Despite grave difficulties, the country has some clear advantages: it has demonstrated its ability to surmount the state failure of the 1990s; citizens seem keen to participate in elections; bribery rates are low and the country’s institutions rate better in terms of effectiveness and public confidence than those of many of its neighbors, including some EU candidate countries. Georgia’s civil service and security establishment, while politically influenced, engage many patriotic professionals. More to the point of this research, Georgia’s vibrant, liberally-minded civil society actors are committed to countering the damaging effects of Russian disinformation and are consistently enhancing their efforts to build resilience. Several efforts have been made to estimate states’ vulnerability to Russia’s influence operations. They all include evaluations of inter-related areas of society, politics, economy, and security. A leading Russia scholar, Mark Galeotti, has attempted to define the extent of the state’s vulnerability to Russian “active measures” (or influence campaigns) by combining the variables of “affinity” to Russia (e.g. cultural, religious, historical ties), and “vulnerability” to it (economic, security, military levers) with the degree of “institutional strength” defined according to the Fragile States Index.<sup>26</sup> This framework is presented in Figure 2, in red are marked the Russian objectives for the particular type of vulnerability, as hypothesized by Galeotti. [3]

During one month we had opportunity to observe the impact of disinformation by survey.

COVID-19 and misinformation - survey results [4]:

Age of participants

18-30 - 51%

31-40 - 14%

41-50 - 15%

51-60 - 12%

61 and above - 8%

Gender

Female - 74%

Male - 26%

Education

Secondary School 17%

Bachelor’s Degree - 53%

Master’s Degree - 18%

PHD - 12%

Dwelling place

Tbilisi - 78%

Gori - 7%

Kutaisi - 2  
Batumi - 4%  
Zugdidi - 3%  
Telavi - 3%  
Abroad - 3%

Have you ever been confirmed for COVID-19?

Yes - 19%  
No - 81%

You get information about COVID-19 (several sources can be selected)

Television - 63%  
Radio - 4%  
Internet - 85%  
Newspaper - 2%  
Relatives - 21%  
Family doctor - 12%  
Ministry of Health - 8%

COVID-19 is spread artificially

False - 72%  
By the West - 4%  
By Russia - 5%  
by China - 15%  
I do not know - 4%

Lugar Lab is dangerous for our health

Yes – 7 %  
No – 93 %

Lugar Lab is important for the security of the country

Yes - 91%  
No - 9%

Who is spreading false information about COVID-19?

West - 8%  
Russia - 33%  
China - 17%  
Hackers - 32%  
I do not know - 10%

Why is misinformation spread about COVID-19? (It is possible to select several points at once)

For the polarization of society - 26%

To show your advantage - 20%

To cause chaos - 80%

I do not know - 23%

The main sources of my information are (it is possible to select several points at once)

1TV.ge - 23%

Imedi TV - 30%

R2 TV - 24%

Mtavari TV - 29%

Formula TV - 18%

TV Lenses - 4%

Social Networks - 59%

ipn.ge - 16%

ON.ge - 8%

CNN - 25%

BBC - 30%

Reuters - 5%

I am trying to verify the information regarding COVID-19

Yes - 82%

No - 18%

I support vaccination

Yes - 72%

No-28%

The primary author of disinformation analyzed was pro-Kremlin media.

The main purpose of disinformation is to polarize Georgian society.

The impact of the disinformation on is dangerous because it causes people to hold false beliefs and sows mistrust in society.

It is too difficult for individuals to counter disinformation about Covid-19, but it may be possible through a collaboration of government, qualified organizations and a society interested in seeking the truth. Media literacy is a critical tool to combat disinformation today.

This study is meant to contribute to a better understanding of disinformation about COVID-19 and its impact on Georgian society.

## Bibliography

[1]Roxana Radu, Fighting the ‘Infodemic’: Legal Responses to COVID-19 Disinformation, Social Media + Society, July 30, 2020. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305120948190>

[2]Caroline Sutcliffe, Disinformation: Can Georgian CSOs play a decisive role? Civli.ge, September 9, 2020. <https://civil.ge/archives/366332>

[3]Jaba Devdariani, Zviad Adzinbaia, RESPONDING TO RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION: A CASE OF GEORGIA, May - August 2019. <http://ewmi-access.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Responding-to->

Russian-Disinformation\_A-Case-of-Georgia\_FINAL\_English\_13.11.2019.pdf

[4]Results of Survey made by Google drive, <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1f7-Z0EVGQk6RyXmPE7x-DpLty8SYagAdqEtFBL78Yck/edit>