

Coronavirus – A New Inspiration for the Russian Propaganda to Spread the Anti-Western Messages

The novel [coronavirus](#) (from the same family of viruses which includes common cold and acute respiratory [syndrome](#) viruses, with an official name of COVID-19), detected in Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, still remains in the global spotlight. The coronavirus death toll has already [exceeded](#) 2,600. There are numerous news reports all across the world media concerning the virus and fatalities, including unverified and false [information](#). The latter can be circulated as a result of lack of competence, panicking or erroneous reporting. However, on top of superficial coverage or other inadvertent mistakes, deliberately misleading news stories about the virus are also promoted, mostly used as a tool to manipulate public opinion. The example of such news reporting could be a [broadcast](#) produced by the Russian RenTV, which suggests US involvement in the coronavirus spread as one of the “credible” versions. In particular, it is claimed that the virus could be man-made and linked to the American laboratories in Asian countries and surrounding Russia. In this context, RenTV draws a parallel with Tbilisi-based Richard Lugar Public Health Research [Centre](#) (the so-called Lugar Laboratory) and speaks of threats coming from that Centre.

Of note is that the Russian media has been spreading information on Lugar Laboratory’s malign influence for years. [Report](#) published by Myth Detector, web-platform for debunking disinformation and fake news, gives detailed account on messages targeting the Lugar Laboratory. For instance: “The laboratory is a ground to confront Russia. There trials dangerous to human health are conducted, biological weapons are produced, viruses are created to kill Georgians and furthermore, these viruses are spread in Russia and Ukraine”. In addition, Russian officials have also voiced the similar allegations multiple times. In April 2018, Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [said](#) on the Lugar Laboratory that “existence of the Pentagon-funded laboratory close to the Russian border is of a great concern for Moscow”. In October of the same year, Ms Zakharova [stated](#) that Moscow had questions, not allegations in regard to the laboratory and the issue should be a subject of public oversight. Concurrently, General Igor Kirillov, Commander of the Russian Armed Forces' Radiological, Chemical and Biological Defence Troops, [said](#) that the United States is using laboratories in Georgia to deliver and unleash biological weapon agents.

In [accordance](#) with the National Centre for Disease Control and Public Safety of Georgia, “Richard Lugar Public Health Research Centre [situated close to the Tbilisi Airport] is the newest building of the NCDC, which has been fully functional since August 2013... The Lugar Centre, including all apparatus, is fully transferred under the ownership by the Government of Georgia, whilst since 2018 the Government of Georgia has been providing full funding for the Lugar Centre and laboratory network. The Lugar Centre incorporates Biosafety Level 2 and Level 3 laboratories, which aim timely detection, identification and tracking of pathogens that cause dangerous diseases in humans and animals. Bacteriology and virology

labs, as well as national inventory of pathogens are located in Biosafety Level 3 (BSL-3) zone, where the most dangerous pathogens (MDP) causing illnesses in humans and animals are securely stored. The Lugar Centre is the only BSL-3 laboratory not only in Georgia but all across the Caucasus and Central Asia”.

Of note is that the NCDC has denied Russian allegations against the laboratory multiple times. Russian experts interested in the activity of the Lugar Laboratory were invited to take part in Peer-Review Compliance Exercise of the Lugar Centre in November 2018 to be assured of safety of the laboratory, although Russia refused to participate. In addition, of particular note is that there is no evidence that would arise the reasonable suspicion on threats coming from the aforementioned Centre. Therefore, Russia’s allegations remain merely assertions. A BBC [investigation](#), which provides a chronology of false information promoted by the Russian media and the authorities, further demonstrates that Russian allegations aim to spread invented facts and disinformation only. There are myriad other sources available to debunk Russian conspiracy theories in regard to the Lugar Laboratory. Therefore, it is evident that we are dealing with the Russian propaganda and the reasons and objectives of the latter are explained below.

Before starting to discuss the Russian propaganda per se, it would be appropriate to have short review of propaganda in general and have a look at the well-known methods of persuading audience employed by Russia to target the Lugar Laboratory. To this aim, we can use the [work](#) of Richard C. Vincent, Professor at Indiana State University, entitled as Global Communication and Propaganda. As clarified by Professor Vincent, “Propaganda has to do with the use of communication channels, through known persuasive or manipulative techniques, in an attempt to shape or alter public opinion”. In other words, propaganda is conducted by using deliberate, selective and biased information, which should result in persuasion of the target audience. Propaganda can be used both inside and outside of a country, by state or non-state actors. Furthermore, we can argue that each and every country uses propaganda components to some extent to gain public support for specific decisions, galvanize patriotic sentiments, etc. Therefore, Professor Vincent believes that all of us are somehow affected by propaganda.

Of note is that both clear disinformation and facts close to the truth can be used for propaganda purposes, although they have to be delivered to the audience in such manner to deny the full picture. As mentioned previously, this is because the aim of propaganda is to make audience believe what propaganda perpetuator wants them to. Propaganda is not used always for evil intention, although it is safe to argue that given propaganda’s manipulative nature and practicing for inhumane and hostile purposes, modern society views it as a problem. Speaking of how propaganda is thought of, Professor Vincent writes that “in the end, it may depend on your personal political, social, and economic beliefs as to whether you find a given propaganda campaign acceptable or not”.

Different techniques to influence the audience can be used during the propaganda campaigns. Of those techniques, we can delineate a few, which are relevant within the

context of the Lugar Centre. One of the propaganda [methods](#) is the so called name calling, which aims to shape public attitude in regard to a specific ethnic group, nation, individual or idea. This method employs emotional reactions and encourages the public to draw hasty and superficial conclusions based on suggested paradigm. The name calling itself can be positive or negative, although we may say that propaganda campaigns largely feature negative and discrediting name calling only. Another [way](#) to influence the audience is the so called card staking, which means selection of facts and distortions as well as using elucidations and confusions and both logical and illogical statements. Eventually, this results in collecting disordered information and concealing the truth in this way. The Big Lie approach is also used here when effectively unbelievable fact is promoted, although this happens so frequently that the audience remembers fact-related person, country or idea in a negative context. In this case, the focus shifts from details to emotions, which does not leave a room for a rational discussion.

The analysis of information on the Lugar Centre spread by Russia illustrates that we are dealing with exactly the aforementioned propaganda techniques. With constant circulation of unfounded, false and distorted facts as well as sharply negative name calling against the medical facility, Russia seeks to foment a subconscious fear in the mind of target audience at the first stage, later to be transformed into a negative perception of this laboratory and the US in general. The aforementioned BBC [investigation](#) very well identifies these propaganda methods. The journalist, who exposed this propaganda campaign based on specific facts, concludes that propaganda works in this way: The most important thing is to press groundless accusations against someone without taking a responsibility and job is done. And when you ask the source of disinformation to produce evidence they say: There is no evidence, but does that mean our accusation is not true?

Of interest is to learn what motivates the Russian propaganda against the Lugar Laboratory. Firstly, it is possible that the Russian authorities are truly in disbelief with the suggestion that US has spent millions of dollars to build a research facility close to Russia only for better protection of public health. However, it is more likely that Russia is perfectly aware that the Lugar Laboratory does not pose any threat, in particular to Moscow, but continues deliberately spreading disinformation-based threats to put psychological pressure on the Government of Georgia at the very least. In addition, hypothetically speaking, Russia can use (in case of favourable situation and a successful propaganda campaign) this so called “threat” against Georgia to start military aggression. The past experience shows that Russia has often justified its aggression at the pretext of “protecting the Russian citizens”. Of note is that the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) did recognise the challenge posed by propaganda and disinformation in its annual reports (2017 [report](#) and 2018 [report](#)). Although the SSG reports make no open indication of the country where these challenges originate, activities described in the reports still clearly make reference to the Russian trace.

Of further note is that the Russian campaign against the Lugar Laboratory peaked in 2018, when UK’s investigation accused Russia of [poisoning](#) former Russian military intelligence officer Sergey Skripal and his daughter on British soil. We can assume that it was

advantageous for Russia at that time to launch such propaganda campaign, seeking to somehow cast a shadow over Kremlin's actions in the foreign country.

Yet another reason, why the Russian propaganda is fighting the Lugar Centre is to show "how bad the West is". It is evident that there is little to nothing Russia can offer to the former soviet countries which the Kremlin seeks to bring back under its influence. For instance, Russia can offer neither more freedom or democracy nor better quality of life or economy as compared to the West. Therefore, Moscow aims to discredit the West as much as possible, guided by the following logic: "I may not have everything in order but it is worse in the West". Of additional note is that monitoring and observation of situation in Georgia do demonstrate the dichotomous [nature](#) of the Russian propaganda: 1. Head-on Russian propaganda, that is, portraying Russia as a guardian of Orthodox Christianity, sharing same faith with Georgia and being a historical ally of the latter and 2. Anti-Western propaganda, which comes from the aforementioned communication channels, organizations and persons and aims to discredit developed western countries (first and foremost US and European nations) as well as Western institutions (for instance, NATO).

Finally, Russia's very hostile attitude towards the Lugar Centre can be explained by the Russian sentiments vis-à-vis the former soviet countries. It is a well-known fact that Russia views these countries, including Georgia, from the position of older brother and custodian and they should never been entitled to oppose Russia. Otherwise, by Svante Cornell, Director of the Institute of Central Asia-Caucasus, [states](#): "Russia's relationship with Georgia reminds me of a man who starts beating his lover after the latter leaves him. Russia cannot deal with the fact that it has lost an empire and that the peoples who were once part of that empire do not want to be with Russia anymore". Russia has lost Georgia within the context of the Lugar Centre too, since the Deputy Director of the NCDC, Paata Imnadze, [says](#) that Georgia does not need requesting Russian help for diagnosis anymore. Mr. Imnadze also adds: "Previously, in a situation like this, it was understandable to ask for their help, since this was a neighbour country with better diagnostic capability. Today it is the opposite - we may provide help to the others".

It is hard to say exactly which of the aforementioned reasons drive Russia. Perhaps, it is only fair to say that to some extent each and every one of them provides "grounds" for ongoing disinformation campaign against the Lugar Laboratory.

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