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COVID 19 and Russia's Informational Attack on its Neighboring States

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COVID 19 and Russia's Informational Attack on its Neighboring States

In recent years, disinformation and propaganda have turned into Russia's main weapon for discrediting its adversaries and strengthening its influence. Moscow has refined these activities to such an extent that overcoming it represents a serious challenge for many countries.

Russia is constantly trying to use important developments internationally or locally in order to build its own information campaign. The most recent clear example of this is the COVID 19 pandemic against the background of which Moscow launched a new disinformation and propaganda campaign.

Georgia is practically constantly an object of Russia's information attacks and this case was no exception either. As many times before, Russia chose the Lugar Laboratory as its main target. This is no surprise as from Moscow's standpoint, the dissemination of COVID 19 created favorable conditions for focusing on the Lugar Laboratory.

Below we will try to identify how Moscow built its disinformation campaign this time. We will also look at the recent information campaigns regarding laboratories in two other post-Soviet states – Kazakhstan and Ukraine. This will enable us to see similarities between the information campaigns and help us in revealing Russian disinformation and propaganda.

Georgia

In general, when Moscow is building a disinformation and propaganda campaign against a specific country, it considers the support from various groups and news sources operating within that state as important for the campaign. Naturally, Moscow also utilizes the same principle when acting against Georgia. Even though the campaign aiming to discredit the Lugar Laboratory already has support from certain groups and news media outlets, the level of support is usually rather low and a sufficient wave of support cannot be generated. Therefore, Moscow is forced to manage the campaign externally and openly, making the Lugar Laboratory a target for various state structures.

Given the dissemination of COVID 19, the Lugar Laboratory became a target of statements made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia on multiple occasions. Originally, the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Maria Zakharova, touched on this issue during a [press briefing](#) on April 17, 2020. The same topic was present in the [comment of](#) the Information and Press Department of the Ministry made in response of the US State Department's report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament.

In both of the aforementioned cases, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia touched on the issue in general terms, at first referring to laboratories "near Russian borders" and later naming only the Lugar Laboratory. Also, in both cases the focus of the statement was that the US was using the Lugar Laboratory for military purposes.

Later Moscow's tone became even harsher. The sole subject of the May 26 [statement](#) by the Press and Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia was the Lugar Laboratory. In this statement Moscow, in an already familiar manner, was trying to direct public attention towards the claim that the Lugar Laboratory has ties with the US land forces and is used for military aims.

The same Department made a similar [statement](#) on May 27 as well. The reason for this was the response statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia in regard to Russia's original statement.

At the end of both of these statements, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia demanded an exclusive bilateral visit to the Lugar Laboratory with the advance guarantees of being allowed to enter all of the laboratory's premises.

These statements contain many noteworthy passages. However, this time we will focus on just one and on which the Tskhinvali occupation regime later attempted to expand. More specifically, the aforementioned statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia referred to the supposed fact that the Lugar Laboratory was conducting experiments on using insects for spreading biological agents and infections. In this regard, it was also claimed (May 26 statement) that the US has already patented drones for spreading infected mosquitoes.

It is no coincidence that the June 4 [information](#) published by the Tskhinvali region so-called State Security Committee also focused on the same issues, pointing out that:

- On June 1 and 3, drones belonging to Georgia flew deep into the territory of the Tskhinvali region.
- Relevant services conducted a chemical-biological reconnaissance on the flight routes of those drones, collecting samples of soil, water, greenery and various insects with the aim of studying them in a laboratory.
- These measures took place due to the high biological threat, given the pandemic of the coronavirus in Georgia and the data regarding the operation of the Lugar Laboratory where experiments are conducted on bats and insects.

The aforementioned statement made by the so-called State Security Committee was a sort of an attempt to strengthen and further disseminate the narrative present in the statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. The externally managed nature of this statement is further confirmed by the fact that it refers to experiments being conducted on bats.

It must be pointed out that a Bulgarian journalist, Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, dedicates special attention to the issue of experiments conducted on bats at the Lugar Laboratory and she published another [article](#) on this issue on April 30, 2020. In this article, the journalist attempts to present arguments in support of a claim that the Lugar Laboratory has long conducted experiments on bats as carriers of the coronavirus with the efforts being funded by the Department of Defense of the United States.

Dilyana Gaytandzhieva is one of the sources of the Kremlin's disinformation not only about the Lugar Laboratory but also about laboratories in other post-Soviet states. According to the [study](#) conducted by Myth Detector, her article cited above bears no connection to reality.

It is noteworthy that disinformation about bats has not only been disseminated about the Lugar Laboratory. The same topic was even more widely and purposefully covered with regard to a laboratory in Kazakhstan which once again points to the externally directed nature of this campaign of disinformation and propaganda.

Kazakhstan

Against the background of the spread of COVID 19, the Reference Laboratory in Almaty became the main target for the Russian disinformation offensive, involving both local as well as Russian internet publications. The analysis of information published about this issue on various Russian-speaking websites gives the impression that the campaign was planned carefully and well in advance.

Back in February when no cases of COVID 19 were officially registered in Kazakhstan, some scandalous information was disseminated in social media regarding the origins of the pandemic. Namely, a supposedly anonymous source from the Central Reference Laboratory of Almaty was claiming that a new strain of the coronavirus was created by American specialists in the aforementioned laboratory.

The dissemination of such information through social media caused a certain level of outcry in Kazakhstan. However, it would seem that this was considered insufficient and approximately a month later, on March 17, 2020, the Russian website *Russkaya Vesna* [Russian Spring] posted a [publication](#) which aimed to strengthen the aforementioned view on the origins of COVID 19 that was circulated in social media. The publication reiterated the version that COVID 19 was artificially created and spread and provided various arguments and “facts” in support of this claim.

Among the main arguments, a 2019 article published in *Virus Magazine* was also used according to which the Almaty Central Reference Laboratory was working on a virus in April-May 2017 whose main carriers were bats. At the same time, *Russkaya Vesna*, based on yet another anonymous source, claimed that the identical nature of the aforementioned virus and the current strain of COVID 19 was confirmed through laboratorial research.

It is notable that the same article by *Russkaya Vesna* also mentioned Georgia; more specifically, saying that “after the end of the Cold War, the United States Department of Defense created several reference laboratories in the post-Soviet area which have a high, third-level of security. Such laboratories are functioning in Kharkov, Tbilisi and Almaty. Officially these labs are fighting against the dissemination of dangerous infectious diseases. In reality, their aim is to prepare for biological warfare in the post-Soviet area.”

It must be pointed out that the website *Russkaya Vesna* is famous for its scandalous publications. It was registered on August 20, 2015. As the website itself says, its main aim is to disseminate operative information about developments in Russia, Novorossiya, Ukraine and Syria. This particular information alone makes the purpose of the website quite clear.

It is doubtful that the website could manage to provide arguments for the artificial spread of COVID 19 citing scientific sources using its own resources alone. This further strengthens the suspicion of their possible connections with Russian security services.

In the case of Kazakhstan, Russian disinformation only partly managed to achieve its goals. The review of open sources shows that skeptical views dominate the discourse regarding the artificial spread of COVID 19 from the Almaty Central Reference Laboratory. At the same time, however, various interpretations

about the US Department of Defense's connections with this and other labs in Kazakhstan have still sprung up in these open sources.

For example, an article published by the website STAN RADAR, entitled "[Что скрывает американская биологическая лаборатория в Казахстане?](#)," puts forward the following views:

- The problem is that even without connections with the spread of COVID 19, the US is using the Almaty Laboratory for its military biological programs.
- Even though the Laboratory does not officially employ foreigners, in reality foreign military servicemen are constantly present there and are leading researchers.
- US Military Naval Forces are openly trying to subvert Kazakh biologists who continue working in their projects both in Kazakhstan as well as abroad.

It must be pointed out that focusing on the presence of the US military in Kazakhstan is quite beneficial for Russian propaganda. This issue could turn out to be rather problematic for Kazakhstan as apart from Russia, China is also categorically opposed to the appearance of US troops in Central Asia. The confirmation of this is Beijing's negative reaction to the creation of US military bases in Central Asia in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, even though initially even Russia did not object to this due to its support to the war against terrorism. Later, Moscow and Beijing united their efforts for closing down US bases in Central Asia.

There is another important factor which must be taken into account in Kazakhstan's case. Namely, it is an active member of all organizations where Russia plays a leading role. More specifically, this includes the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It is clear that this gives Moscow additional leverage for exercising pressure over Nursultan.

Ukraine

The dissemination of disinformation about the connections of Ukrainian laboratories to the United States as well as about the research taking place there is nothing new. In recent years, this topic has been circulating in both Ukrainian and Russian media with varying intensity. This periodically serves as a subject of speculation by different political groups in Ukraine.

Moving the issues of "US laboratories" in Ukraine to the forefront during the COVID 19 period is partly connected to the domestic politics of Ukraine. At the same time, however, it is fully compatible with the context of the disinformation that Moscow disseminates with regard to its neighboring states, including Georgia. This is especially noticeable since the issue of laboratories was brought at the top of the discussion by a political group famous for its pro-Russian sentiments.

More specifically on April 15, 2020, the Chairman of the Political Council of a Ukrainian political party, «Оппозиционная платформа – За жизнь» (Opposition Platform – For Life), Viktor Medvedchuk, published a [statement](#) in which he informed the public that he had addressed the President, Prime Minister, Minister of Health and Security Services of Ukraine, requesting information about the activities of US laboratories in Ukraine.

The aforementioned statement says the following:

- The appearance of several dangerous infectious diseases in Ukraine coincided with the beginning of the functioning of US laboratories in Ukraine and the US funding of Ukraine's scientific-technical projects.
- Due to the growth in the number of dangerous infectious diseases, there is every ground for the population to think that the secret and covert activities of these biological facilities on the territory of Ukraine has the task of testing the influence of viruses on the population of Ukraine.
- As a result of the tests conducted in 2010-2012, a number of violations with regard to the maintenance of security norms were revealed in biological laboratories which could have caused the dissemination of various strains of dangerous infectious diseases. Therefore, a decision was made in 2013 to terminate cooperation between the US and Ukraine in the field of biological experiments. However, after Poroshenko's arrival to power, the cooperation in this regard was restored.

After the aforementioned statement, the topic of laboratories in Ukraine was widely covered in a highly negative context in some Ukrainian and a large number of Russia media sources. Almost all of these publications focused especially on the supposed frequent spread of various unknown infectious diseases in Ukrainian regions in recent years as well as the connections of the United States Department of Defense to the Ukrainian laboratories and the research taking place there. Many of these sources also mentioned the Lugar Laboratory and also in a negative context.

The Ukrainian portal, [MediaSapiens](#), which works on debunking disinformation and manipulation with information, dedicated a rather [lengthy study](#) to the issue of how various media outlets covered the topic of the laboratories. The study identifies Ukrainian media sources and politicians and the oligarchs connected to them who facilitated in the dissemination of this topic. Bulgarian journalist, Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, mentioned in the context of Georgia earlier, was also identified as one of the sources of disinformation about laboratories in Ukraine.

The study also outlines the template messages about the Ukrainian laboratories in the news materials produced by Russian and Ukrainian media outlets. More specifically, the study says that these template messages are:

- There are secret US laboratories functioning in Ukraine. That said, different publications often give very different numbers of these laboratories – ranging from 11 to 16.
- All of these laboratories are violating the 1972 agreement on the prohibition of biological weapons.
- The activities of these laboratories are practically outside of the control of the Government of Ukraine.
- After they started functioning, unknown infectious diseases have been observed in Ukraine. On the other hand, the dates and areas of the spread of the diseases as well as the names of the diseases themselves differ from one publication to another.

According to the aforementioned study, a sharp increase in disinformation about laboratories in Ukraine usually coincides with the expiry of the US-Ukraine agreement in this field. This time around as well, in December 2020, a framework agreement between Ukraine and the United States is set to expire. Therefore, this could be considered as one of the types of pressure on the Government of Ukraine to not extend the agreement any further.

Conclusion

Moscow views the issue of laboratories existing in post-Soviet states in the context of its confrontation with the United States. When reviewing this topic, Russian mass media names seven post-Soviet states where, according to their claims, US bio-laboratories are functioning (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Moldova and Ukraine).

Moscow is trying its best to put this issue on the highest political level. This is precisely why the topic of bio-laboratories is often [discussed](#) by various Russian state structures and officials as one of the main threats to the national security of the Russian Federation.

Therefore, it is to be expected that Moscow will continue dedicating more time to this in its information warfare despite the fact that its accusations are often absurd.

So, from the cases of Georgia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine as reviewed against the background of the COVID 19 pandemic, it is clear that Russia uses similar schemes and mechanisms to generate disinformation and propaganda waves against the laboratories existing in the post-Soviet area. The main difference from Moscow's standpoint is probably the fact that the pro-Russian groups and mass media sources in Georgia are unable to sufficiently support this topic. Therefore, it is probably one of the main tasks for Russia to activate this missing component in order for the informational attack against the Lugar Laboratory in Georgia to be able to generate more resonance in the public.