



**Identify Disinformation**

Social media monitoring results

(October-November, 2020)

2020

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## Introduction

Disinformation messages are a significant challenge for the World Health Organization and national health systems in the fight against the pandemic. The frequency of the spread of false news and conspiracy theories around the Covid-19 pandemic is so high in the online world that it creates an alternative reality. Consequently, it has become difficult to draw a line between propaganda and real story.

As observation shows, social media and other mass communications are a favorable platform for disinformation campaigns and propaganda. The present report reflects the results of the social media monitoring conducted by the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), analyzing the messages of media outlets spreading disinformation during the pandemic, from October to November 2020, and identifying key trends in their manipulative discourse. The analysis is based on data obtained from Facebook pages (statuses and photo-video visualization).

In total, the Democracy Research Institute identified 785 cases of disinformation, stigma and conspiracy theories relating to Covid-19 on 15 websites and 10 Facebook pages. The infodemic<sup>1</sup> filled with false news and conspiracy theories mainly concerned unsubstantiated methods of treatment for coronavirus and questions about the origin of the virus.

It can be said as the key finding that one of the main targets of the disinformation campaign is the Covid-19 experimental vaccine. This issue has been studied by the UK Government Communications Center (GCHQ). According to them, the main source of disinformation about Covid-19 vaccines is Russia.

An active pro-Russian campaign around Russian vaccine - "Sputnik V" was conducted in Georgia as well. Conspiracy theories of anti-Western content were also spread about the artificial creation of the virus by the United States in a laboratory and the use of the vaccine as a mechanism for controlling the world population by Microsoft founder Bill Gates. The infodemic around the Covid-19 virus included disinformation about inaccurate methods of treatment, ways of transmission and origin of the virus. There was also an active campaign to discredit the future vaccination process.

The media monitoring showed that the disinformation media campaign around the Covid-19 pandemic is of network nature and deliberately manipulates public opinion. The disinformation campaign in turn creates fabricated, manipulative content and causes significant harm, as it instills uncertainty and fear in society.

### 1. Methodological framework

The media monitoring includes both quantitative and qualitative data. It analyzes the main messages of the Covid-19-related disinformation campaign in the online media context. The report groups both informational and visual materials related to coronavirus on the basis of thematic typology.

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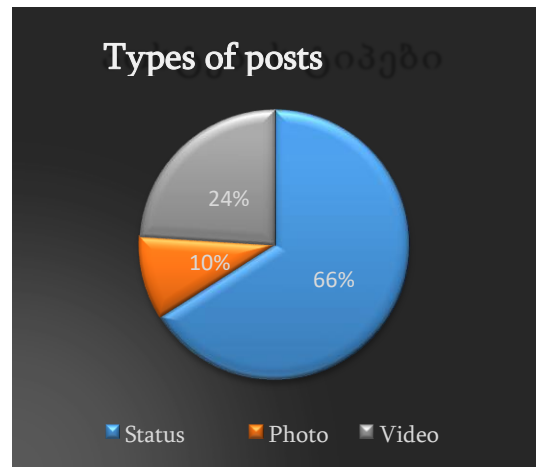
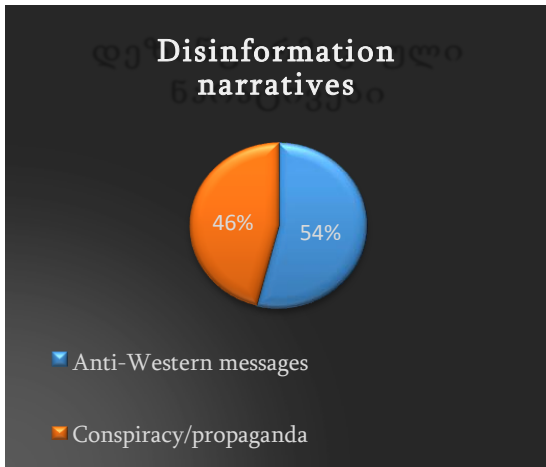
<sup>1</sup> An overabundance of information, accompanied by the spread of false news and conspiracy theories.

The purpose of the report is to identify the main messages of the media outlets spreading disinformation during the coronavirus pandemic and to inform the public about the key characteristics of infodemic discourse. For the purpose of identifying the trending messages, we selected the Facebook pages and media outlets, the users of which are distinguished by high online interaction, as objects of our study. For the purpose of analyzing disinformation campaigns in a wide range, we selected media outlets with different editorial policies and contexts. We used the Facebook analytics tool CrowdTangle to identify the frequency and sources of disinformation.

The disinformation narratives studied by us can be divided into two main groups according to their content characteristics: anti-Western messages and conspiracy/propaganda messages.

**Frequency of interaction**

Narrative	Number of statuses and articles	Number of shares	Number of comments	Other reactions	Overall interaction
Anti-Western messages	405	1000	1300	1 375	3675
Conspiracy/propaganda messages	380	775	1042	1022	2839



**Interaction in percentage**

**Types of posts in percentage**

More than half of the posts - 66% - posted by the objects selected for media monitoring was textual material (statuses, articles), 24% - videos and 10% - photos. The total interaction showed that anti-Western posts enjoyed the highest rating.

Both pro-Russian and sharply conservative, anti-liberal media outlets were selected as objects of the monitoring. Our attention was also drawn by Georgian online outlets, which most often spread disinformation on Covid-19.

**Online media outlets selected as objects of the monitoring:**

1.	<b>Georgia and the World</b>	<a href="http://geworld.ge/ge/">http://geworld.ge/ge/</a>
2.	<b>Saqinform</b>	<a href="http://saqinform.ge/">http://saqinform.ge/</a>
3.	<b>Sputnik Georgia</b>	<a href="https://sputnik-georgia.com/">https://sputnik-georgia.com/</a>
4.	<b>Alt-Info</b>	<a href="https://alt-info.com/">https://alt-info.com/</a>
5.	<b>abcnews</b>	<a href="http://abcnews.com.ge/">http://abcnews.com.ge/</a>

6.	Tvalsazrisi	<a href="https://tvalsazrisi.ge/">https://tvalsazrisi.ge/</a>
7.	News-Front Georgia	<a href="https://ge.news-front.info/">https://ge.news-front.info/</a>
8.	Alia	<a href="https://www.alia.ge/">https://www.alia.ge/</a>
9.	For.ge	<a href="https://for.ge/">https://for.ge/</a>
10.	qartuliazri.reportiori.ge	<a href="http://qartuliazri.reportiori.ge/">http://qartuliazri.reportiori.ge/</a>
11.	exclusivenews.ge	<a href="http://www.exclusivenews.ge/">http://www.exclusivenews.ge/</a>
12.	Hot News	<a href="http://hotnews.ge/index.php/en/">http://hotnews.ge/index.php/en/</a>
13.	Info-Postalioni	<a href="https://www.infpostalioni.com/">https://www.infpostalioni.com/</a>
14.	presa.ge	<a href="https://presa.ge/?m=world&amp;AID=80719">https://presa.ge/?m=world&amp;AID=80719</a>
15.	readtime.ge	<a href="http://readtime.ge/">http://readtime.ge/</a>

Facebook pages selected as objects of the monitoring:

1.	Combat coronavirus/Covid 19 together	<a href="https://cutt.ly/UhwzUrL">https://cutt.ly/UhwzUrL</a>
2.	Stalin	<a href="https://cutt.ly/9hwzlRQ">https://cutt.ly/9hwzlRQ</a>

3.	<b>For Georgia</b>	<a href="https://cutt.ly/YhwxqsK">https://cutt.ly/YhwxqsK</a>
4.	<b>Towards Christ</b>	<a href="https://cutt.ly/YhwxikP">https://cutt.ly/YhwxikP</a>
5.	<b>General People's Movement</b>	<a href="https://cutt.ly/Vhwz1kz">https://cutt.ly/Vhwz1kz</a>
6.	<b>Corona Mafia</b>	<a href="https://cutt.ly/HhwzXYb">https://cutt.ly/HhwzXYb</a>
7.	<b>Politicano</b>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/PoliticanoGeorgia">https://www.facebook.com/PoliticanoGeorgia</a>
8.	<b>Georgian Kiramala</b>	<a href="https://cutt.ly/OhwxQKL">https://cutt.ly/OhwxQKL</a>
9.	<b>Dedakalaki</b>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/dedakalaki">https://www.facebook.com/dedakalaki</a>
10.	<b>Saerto Gza</b>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/saertogazeti.ge">https://www.facebook.com/saertogazeti.ge</a>

## 2. Anti-Western messages of disinformation campaign during the Covid-19 pandemic

After Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, a number of conspiracy theories and false news with anti-Western messages have been spread by the online media. An important target of the disinformation campaign has become, on the one hand, Western companies working on vaccines and, on the other hand, the World Health Organization. In addition, anti-vax<sup>2</sup> campaign has been intensified.

The main goal of the disinformation campaign was to instill distrust towards Western companies and institutions, by making up and spreading false news. The disinformation campaign targeted health systems of the leading Western countries and the World Health Organization. Anti-Western, disinformation campaigns were directed against them, according to which, coronavirus was invented by pharmaceutical companies in order to receive proceeds worth billions. It is worth noting that Western pharmaceutical companies and the World Health Organization are perceived by anti-vaxxers as forces with liberal, hostile ideologies. That is why they are skeptical about the actions of the World Health Organization and therefore distrust the pandemic. The disinformation campaign against the World Health Organization has become so widespread that activation of large media and technology companies became necessary to fight against the infodemic. The director of the World Health Organization said at a security conference in Munich on February 15 that in the fight against fake news, they started cooperating with media companies such as Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Tencent, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and others.

### **Key anti-Western messages about coronavirus:**

- The process accompanying the spread of the virus is forced vaccination by Western pharmaceutical companies, which, on the one hand, serves to control the population en masse, and on the other hand, serves to receive financial proceeds worth billions.
- The World Health Organization made a deal with Western pharmaceutical companies in order to receive proceeds and the pandemic does not actually exist.

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<sup>2</sup> Groups of people who do not trust vaccines, doubt their effectiveness and do not recognise their need. In addition, they spread various conspiracy theories against vaccines.



## Pharmaceutical companies and anti-vax discourse

Numerous conspiracy theories and disinformation related to coronavirus were spread via Facebook, according to which, the pandemic is a well-planned fraud and serves to enrich pharmaceutical companies. The source of false news spread by anti-vax groups in Georgia was an article published on the Russian-language website stoppanika.ru,<sup>3</sup> according to which, the World Health Organization promotes the spread of the virus and aims to enrich pharmaceutical companies by vaccinating the world population.

**Disinformation No. 1:** The pandemic is a fraud and serves to enrich pharmaceutical companies and Anthony Fauci through vaccination.

**Fact:** So far, the World Health Organization has not approved any vaccine of any pharmaceutical company against Covid-19. Information about the financial proceeds of Anthony Fauci, Director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, is a conspiracy theory. Up to 70 vaccines are currently being tested. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases partners with one of them, although there is no evidence that Anthony Fauci will receive proceeds if the vaccine is approved.

**Sources of dissemination of disinformation:** This disinformation was spread via networks by the following Facebook groups: Corona Fraud, Anti-Masonry, New World Order of the Antichrist (NWO), Anti-Ecumenism, General People's Movement, Corona Mafia. According to CrowdTangle, the total online interaction reached 854 users.



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<sup>3</sup> stoppanika.ru, „ПАНДЕМИЯ COVID-19 - ПРОЕКТ ВОЗ И ВСЕМИРНОГО БАНКА“, October 5, 2020- available at: <https://cutt.ly/shttfwf>

### 3. Disinformation campaign and conspiracy theories

During the pandemic, various conspiracy theories and false information have been spread in the online space about the origin, treatment and diagnosis of Covid-19. Disinformation about the virus has completely covered the online media and reached such a scale that the World Health Organization named an infodemic as a significant challenge amid the fight against the pandemic. UN Secretary-General António Guterres tweeted: "Our common enemy is Covid-19, but our enemy is also an "infodemic" of disinformation." Disinformation messages and conspiracy theories around the virus significantly hinder the effective functioning of public health systems and instill public distrust towards the World Health Organization.

False information about treatment and diagnosis were spread on various online platforms in Georgia as well. Certain individuals and groups were actively sharing conspiracy theories about treatment methods via the social network. Numerous conspiracy theories were developed about the artificial creation and spread of the virus.

The disinformation campaign on treatment and diagnosis put both public health systems and lives of people at risk because of its large scale. Clear proof of this was the fatalities in Iran. According to the Telegraph, the use of methyl alcohol as treatment for Covid-19 claimed 700 lives in Iran. The BBC journalistic investigation, which was based on the stories told by doctors, victims and experts, made it clear that specific crimes that caused deaths were directly related to disinformation spread around the Covid-19 virus. A report published by a team of researchers in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene reads that at the beginning of the pandemic, more than 800 people were killed worldwide by widespread disinformation about Covid-19.<sup>5</sup>

The intensification of the anti-vax campaign was obvious in Georgia as well. Conspiracy theories about vaccination with microchips for the purpose of controlling the world population were spread by various online outlets and Facebook pages. In addition, an important disinformation message of anti-vax campaign was that the Covid-19 vaccine could change human DNA and thus establish world control. The above information is part of the conspiracy theories surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, which aims to mislead people around the vaccine and to create public distrust.

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<sup>4</sup> Myth detector, "Where conspiracies that the Covid pandemic was planned to reduce the number of population and enrich pharmaceutical companies come from?" October 15, 2020, available at: <https://cutt.ly/khtysmN>

<sup>5</sup> On.ge, "Hundreds of people died due to disinformation spread on Covid-19", 28 August 2020, available: <http://tiny.cc/ep75tz>

## Covid-19 and fake methods of treatment

**Disinformation No. 2:** German scientists named a plant that destroys 97% of coronavirus in a few minutes.

**Truth:** The assertion that German scientists discovered a plant that kills coronavirus in a few minutes is based on a study published on the Thai medicine web portal, the reliability or validity of which have not been confirmed by the international scientific community. In addition, the study did not specify which serum was used during the experiment.

**Sources of dissemination of disinformation:** The above-mentioned disinformation was spread via networks by the following Facebook pages and groups: Diaspora News, Georgia, Under the Italian Sky, Emigrant's Diaries from America. In total, the manipulative material, according to which, there is a plant that cures coronavirus, has been shared 165 times in the social group, and according to CrowdTangle, the online interaction exceeded 300 users in total. The original source of disinformation in Georgian online media was the Nostal.ge web portal.

**Disinformation No. 3:** Levofloxacin is the first drug to treat the Covid-19 virus.

**Truth:** The claim that Levofloxacin is an effective treatment for Covid-19 virus is false. Levofloxacin belongs to antibacterial drugs and its annotation emphasizes that it is used for respiratory, ear, nasal and skin infections. Covid-19 is a virus and not a bacterial disease. In addition, according to the World Health Organization, there is still no medication that can cure the Covid-19 virus. In addition, the World Health Organization constantly urges the population not to resort to self-treatment in case of Covid-19 virus and draws attention to the dangers that accompany taking drugs independently, without the supervision of a doctor.

**Sources of dissemination of disinformation:** The disinformation about Levofloxacin was spread on Facebook pages: Stalin, Main News, World Center of Georgians and In the Middle of the Road. The tv.mg portal was indicated as the original source of information. According to CrowdTangle, in total, online interaction exceeded 220 users.

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<sup>6</sup> factcheck.ge, "Disinformation: German scientists named a plant which kills 97% of coronavirus in 5 minutes", November 16, 2020, available at: <https://cutt.ly/ahtDyzW>

## Conspiracy theories and disinformation about the origin and characteristics of the Covid-19 virus

**Disinformation No. 4:** Covid-19 is a simple virus, seasonal flu is more dangerous and mortality is also higher in case of seasonal flu.

**Truth:** Unfortunately, this assertion is unfounded. Seasonal flu mortality rate (0.1%) is much lower than that of Covid-19. According to the November data of the World Health Organization, 2.7% of patients died from Covid-19. It is also disinformation to claim that Covid-19 is less dangerous than seasonal flu. According to the Georgian National Center for Disease Control, coronavirus spreads faster and is much more dangerous for older people than seasonal flu.

**Sources of dissemination of disinformation:** The disinformation that the seasonal flu is more dangerous than coronavirus was actively spread in the following Facebook groups: General People's Movement and Georgia First. The original source of disinformation is the publishers.ge web portal. According to CrowdTangle, the online interaction exceeded 200 users.

**Disinformation No. 5:** The fact-finding commission found fraudulent contents of the Covid-19 virus and the pandemic was declared a fraud.

**Truth:** In fact, the statement of 7 doctors and German lawyer Rainer Fulmich, according to which, the Covid-19 pandemic is a fraud, has not been followed by any official response. In addition, according to the lawyer's video address, he is expressing his personal opinions. The authors' statement regarding the false pandemic lacks legal argument. Consequently, the allegation that the Covid-19 pandemic was declared a fraud is conspiratorial.

**Sources of dissemination of disinformation:** The above-mentioned conspiracy theory was spread via networks by the following Facebook pages: Corona Mafia, Anti-Masonry, New World Order of the Antichrist (NWO); Anti-Ecumenism and Citizen. According to CrowdTangle, the online interaction exceeded 250 users.



## Bill Gates and anti-vax discourse

An important target of the online and social media disinformation campaign turned out to be Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft. The reason was the fact that he is one of the most important donors in the fight against the pandemic and is actively campaigning for the importance of vaccination. During the media monitoring period, disinformation was spread against him via networks, according to which, Bill Gates is trying to gain mass control over the world population through vaccination and is using the pandemic for personal proceeds. In addition, there were active reports that he made a deal with the World Health Organization to declare the Covid-19 virus a pandemic. One of the sources of this disinformation in Georgia was the online video address of the clergy - "Pandemic or Corona-fraud".

**Disinformation No. 6:** Bill Gates plans to launch compulsory and dangerous vaccinations around the world in order to gain mass control of the population.

**Truth:** The information spread in Georgian Facebook groups that Bill Gates was planning to dominate the world through forced vaccination is disinformation, the original source of which is the Russian website - cont.ws. The article reads that Bill Gates published an article in the New England Journal of Medicine, in which he outlined his plan for forced vaccination of the world population. In fact, this article of Bill Gates, which was entitled "Responding to Covid-19 - A Once-in-a-Century Pandemic?", was published in February and the founder of Microsoft talked about the global threats and challenges of the Covid-19 virus and offered recommendations for dealing with the pandemic. The article did not mention forced vaccination. Accordingly, the allegation of the scientific journal about Bill Gates' plan to control the world population with "dangerous vaccination" is disinformation.

**Sources of dissemination of disinformation:** Anti-Masonry, New World Order of the Antichrist (NWO); Anti-Ecumenism, General People's Movement for the Rescue of the Georgian Nation!, Georgia First, Corona Mafia, Under the Italian Sky. According to CrowdTangle, the total number of online interactions reached 1,100 users.



**Disinformation No. 7:** There is no pandemic. In order to declare coronavirus a pandemic, Bill Gates bribed the World Health Organization according to his fraudulent plan.

**Truth:** In fact, Bill Gates is one of the largest donors of the World Health Organization. His donation at the beginning of the pandemic alone was \$ 150 million. Bill Gates warned the World Health Organization in

early February that the pandemic was imminent, although the Covid-19 virus had not been declared a pandemic until March 11, 2020. It is also disinformation to claim that the pandemic does not exist, whereas the number of people infected with the virus is growing daily and as of December, it exceeds 77 million in 220 countries, while the death toll is over 1,700,000.

**Sources of dissemination of disinformation:** Corona Fraud, General People's Movement for the Rescue of the Georgian Nation!, Georgia First, Anti-Masonry, New World Order of the Antichrist (NWO), Anti-Ecumenism, World Center of Georgians. It should be noted that the video address of the clergy "Pandemic or Corona-fraud" was assessed by Facebook as disinformation. According to CrowdTangle, in total, the online interaction exceeded 6400 users.

