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Russian Anti-Western Disinformation, Media Consumption and Public Opinion in Georgia

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Abstract

States have learned how to use media as a means of propagating disinformation in the furtherance of their geopolitical goals. Often these efforts employ conspiracy theories that target other countries, whether as direct adversaries or in third-party states. Russia has a well-deserved reputation for being especially adept at this practice as it seeks to influence public opinion in other states through its international channels as well as domestic media and local politicians in the target countries. This article assesses the impact of disinformation campaigns in the Republic of Georgia. Using survey data from 2019, we examine how three specific anti-Western conspiracy theories were amplified by media outlets associated with Russia or with Georgian outlets that aired material more sympathetic to Russian foreign policy preferences. We found that respondents who trusted Georgian media with a pro-Russian orientation and/or who were exposed to Russian television were more likely to accept conspiracy theories aligned with Russia's geopolitical interests, suggesting that Russian disinformation efforts might be moderately successful in persuading some Georgian citizens.

IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, STATES EXPLOITED ADVANCES in information technology and made more extensive use of traditional media to propagate narratives and storylines supporting their foreign policy goals. These efforts have often been seen as a vector of 'soft power' projection; that is, positive messaging through public diplomacy intended to 'attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments' (Nye 2008).[1] There is, however, a more sinister and manipulative aspect to heightened media activity in a more interconnected world. As part of a broader set of coercive or destabilising

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[1]See also Chapman and Gerber (2019).

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actions usually viewed as 'political warfare' (Robinson *et al*. 2019), state actors or their proxies have increasingly deployed false stories or conspiracy theories to attack rivals.

As a subset of the broader phenomenon of 'misinformation',[2] 'disinformation'[3]—or 'hostile social manipulation'—such efforts may constitute 'virtual societal warfare' that threatens the political and geopolitical stability of states (Mazarr *et al*. 2019), especially in countries featuring weak institutions (Warren 2014). The intent of these efforts is to disrupt the informational ecosystem and 'weaponise' the information space (Singer & Brooking 2019; Kornbluh & Goodman 2020). The impact of such malicious actions may be enhanced by the more rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation as opposed to accurate information through online forms of communication (Vosoughi *et al*. 2018).

Further, scholars have argued that news and information are more frequently viewed as subjective rather than objective, owing to the proliferation of platforms for distribution, growing attempts at persuasion, broader audience targeting and increasing strategic interventions or persistent threats (Friestad & Wright 1994; Vosoughi *et al*. 2018; Ahmed *et al*. 2019; Singer & Brooking 2019). Third-party disinformation or conspiracy theories, initiated by states to serve broader geopolitical goals within a master narrative and subordinate storylines (Toal 2017, pp. 40–51), are an essential part of this tendency and are well-documented in the literature (Kornbluh & Goodman 2020). Finally, the increasing reach of social media platforms allows operators to accelerate the spread of disinformation and, with appropriate caveats, may now even enable near real-time analysis of public opinion (Driscoll & Steinert-Threlkeld 2020, pp. 101–21).

Beyond the description and content analysis that is the focus of most research on disinformation is the question of its effectiveness in shaping public opinion (Chapman & Gerber 2019). Here we assess messaging effectiveness by investigating how, at a particular point in time, a set of three anti-Western conspiracy theories, demonstrably propagated by Russian actors in the interest of Russia's master anti-Western narrative, resonated amongst citizens in Georgia. In this article, we explore how the consumption of specific media sources is associated with the acceptance of anti-Western conspiracy theories. Our post-test-only design on the acceptance of Russian storylines by Georgian respondents cannot definitively show a causal relationship between disinformation and attitudes. However, we adduce two hypotheses to test for a significant association between media consumption and reported beliefs about specific foreign policy issues within the larger Russian master narrative.

We address our research questions in three sections. First, we examine the broader contexts of Russian disinformation campaigns and interdisciplinary literatures on third-party disinformation. Second, we explore a set of three specific storyline elements concerning the master Russian narrative involving putative Western interests in the Republic of Georgia that coalesced in 2019. We then formulate hypotheses to test the extent to which media consumption from different sources, some of which convey a pro-Russian narrative, is associated with opinions on the disinformation propagated by

[2]Misinformation is information that is 'inaccurate or misleading' (Vosoughi *et al*. 2018).

[3]We define disinformation as 'the *purposeful* dissemination of information intended to mislead or harm' (Nemr & Gangware 2019).

Russia and its proxies. Third, we discuss and analyse our data from a unique public opinion survey in 2019 by the Tbilisi-based Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC). We conclude the article with our empirical analysis, assessing how our findings contribute to the literature on third-party disinformation generally and Russian media campaigns specifically.

Disinformation and the Russian Federation

Like other states, Russia uses a wide range of tactics to advance its strategic goals of agenda-setting and eliciting positive attitudes about Russian society, the state and its foreign policy objectives in the soft power sense (Rawnsley 2015). Beyond soft power persuasive methods, Russia also deploys 'active measures' undertaken by its intelligence services ranging from 'hack and leak' operations, the dissemination of forged documents designed to 'expose' Western perfidy, and disruptive cyber-attacks (Rid 2020). Russian efforts include the creation and dissemination of stories corresponding to its preferences, along with the amplification of narratives created by other sources that align with its interests (Galeotti 2019).

The Russian Federation is also widely viewed as a leading purveyor of disinformation across various media platforms, preferring but not exclusively targeting neighbouring post-Soviet states (Pomerantsev 2014; Fisher 2020). Stricklin (2020) posits a four-fold rationale for Russia's disinformation efforts: to restore Russia to 'great power' status by eroding the influence of the United States and its allies; to secure Russia's borders by weakening or suborning neighbouring states; to protect the regime by enhancing the Russian state's legitimacy by delegitimising alternatives (that is, democratic institutions); and to bolster Russia's military effectiveness by using disinformation to weaken neighbouring states, as a possible precursor or adjunct to kinetic warfare.

States bordering Russia are particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns due to their proximity and to the in-depth knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of those societies available to actors within the Russian government's intelligence and media agencies. Linguistic, economic and social ties make these states especially vulnerable to Russian media penetration and messaging. Many include large populations of ethnolinguistic Russians in addition to residents of minority and titular ethnic groups who are fluent or conversant in the Russian language. These individuals often maintain family connections in Russia, and some rely on remittances from guest worker relatives there.

Russia employs an extensive array of state-owned media and proxies in other states to frame information that promotes a perception of Russia and its allies as positive actors and its opponents as negative actors (Snegovaya 2015; Chapman & Gerber 2019; Rozenas & Stukal 2019). These same media outlets spread disinformation through original reporting, films, audio and still imagery disseminated *via* the internet, social media, satellite television, and traditional radio and television broadcasting (Paul & Matthews 2016; Nazarenko 2019; Lupion 2021). While some international consumers of Russian state broadcasters such as *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and the *Sputnik* news agency seek entertainment or general interest features (Kern & Hainmueller 2009), they are also exposed to news and opinion programming designed to advance Russian foreign policy interests (Yablokov 2015, 2018).

Russia's reputation for adept disinformation stems from its longstanding and increasing capacity in that realm, as well as an ability to misdirect attribution. Notable as an example of Moscow's event-oriented disinformation capabilities is the massive effort to deflect blame for its role in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) over Ukraine in July 2014, which claimed 298 lives (Higgins 2020). Indeed, as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine over the latter's Donbas region demonstrated, prior to the February 2022 invasion, such activities are difficult to attribute under the best of circumstances, and their asymmetry with conventional forms of aggression are synergistic, short of war and consequently low risk for kinetic counterattacks or economic sanctions (Barnes 2022).

Given the well-documented breadth and depth that Russia pursues in its malign influence campaigns, 'it is less straightforward to assess how *effective* Russian propaganda has been at swaying the views of its intended audiences' (Gerber & Zavisca 2016, p. 80). In some of the subject countries, the Russian-propagated narrative is more widely accepted, whereas in others it is much less so. Examining 2015 polling in Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, Gerber and Zavisca (2016) found mixed results regarding local public opinion towards the United States, Germany and Russia as well as views about the war in Ukraine; the foreign funding of non-governmental organisations; and the core institutions of democracy. Likewise, Radnitz (2017) surveyed people in Georgia and Kazakhstan to probe their propensity to accept both generic (that is, global) conspiracies and disinformation dealing with specific (for example, more localised) issues with more clearly identified actors, finding that both Georgians and Kazakhstanis had a relatively high rate of generic conspiracy theory acceptance and a lower but still appreciable rate of specific conspiracy acceptance.

In related research focusing exclusively on Kyrgyzstan, Chapman and Gerber suggested 'media are most effective at increasing the salience of specific topics on the public agenda by introducing audiences to new information, informing them on particular issues, and signaling that these issues are important' (Chapman & Gerber 2019, p. 757). In data focused on a specific foreign affairs storyline regarding blame for the Ukrainian conflict, respondents in Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan tended to blame Russia less when they were consumers of Russian news (the choices included the US, Russian or Ukrainian governments, or other).

A different subset of scholars investigated in depth the linkage between media consumption and public opinion particular to specific conflict-related or 'shock events' in Ukraine (Hale *et al*. 2018; Toal & O'Loughlin 2018). Although relevant only indirectly to our purpose, which concerns longer-term geopolitical messaging, those studies revealed varying but sometimes significant degrees of association between blame attribution and media consumption regarding 48 deaths in a building fire in Odesa and the 298 who perished in the downing of MH17 in 2014.

Disinformation in the Republic of Georgia: background and hypotheses

How successful are Russia's efforts to shape residents' views on specific foreign policy issues in which Russia has a vested national security interest, including partnerships with the United States, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)? Georgia is a particularly relevant case study to address that question. We

examine attempts by Russia and its proxies to spread a set of specific conspiracies through media outlets to manipulate public opinion in Georgia, especially relating to Georgian government efforts to seek closer alignment with Western actors. As Radnitz (2021) shows, the country has been permeated by domestic political disinformation and conspiracy campaigns. Further, Georgia was subject to Russian kinetic warfare in 2008 and repeatedly targeted for aggressive information operations and cyber-attacks designed to disrupt internet usage and television viewership (Lamothe 2020; Roguski 2020). Many view Russian military intelligence (*Glavnoe upravlenie General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh sil RF*—the Main Intelligence Directorate, GRU) as leading Russia's destabilisation and disinformation efforts. A 2014 report by Google on GRU hacking attacks against 'former Soviet republics, NATO members and other Western European countries' determined that Georgia was 'at the top of the target list' (Rid 2020). There is ample evidence of increasing Russian disinformation efforts directed against Georgia utilising both domestic (*via* Russian-oriented Georgian media) and foreign messaging (*via* Russian state-directed media), as well as traditional and social media platforms (McCain Institute 2019). Russia persistently voices negative reactions to NATO-sponsored activities, particularly the military exercises that now take place regularly in Georgia and are perceived as threatening to Russian interests (Clem 2018). The ongoing geopolitical drama surrounding the status of, and territory comprised by, the *de facto* 'states' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the resultant friction between Russia and Georgia exemplifies both the complexity and volatility of the region (Toal & Merabishvili 2019).

Russia's efforts targeting Georgia have amplified domestic disagreements and undermined confidence in Western institutions (Nilsson 2021). Some narratives are designed to trigger concerns amongst more socially conservative Georgians while simultaneously undermining the appeal of Western European institutions.[4] The overarching narrative associated with this storyline connects EU cooperation with socially progressive causes, designed to intensify the responses of conservative or far-right organisations (Baranec 2018).[5] For example, events and organisations advancing LGBTQ rights have been met with strong opposition and even violence.[6] Other conservative-triggering stories circulating in Georgia have connected the investor and philanthropist George Soros with efforts to undermine the Orthodox Church.[7] While it is challenging to trace the provenance of conspiracy theories, Russian media, politicians and other actors have helped to amplify or advance many of them.

[4]Conservatism has also been ascendant in Russia under President Vladimir Putin. See, for example, Robinson (2019, ch. 11).

[5]See also, 'Far Right Georgian March Movement, Known for its Anti-LGBT Activities, Created Political Party', *Agenda*, 2 July 2020, available at: https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2102, accessed 3 May 2023.

[6]See, for example, 'LGBT+ Campaigners in Georgia Call Off Pride March After Office Attack', *Reuters*, 5 July 2021, available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/protesters-storm-lgbt-campaigners-office-tbilisi-before-planned-march-2021-07-05/, accessed 3 May 2023.

[7]'What did the "Georgian March" Fail to Count on Soros and the Public Defender?', *OSGF*, 12 August 2020, available at: https://osgf.ge/en/what-did-the-georgian-march-fail-to-count-on-soros-and-the-public-defender/, accessed 3 May 2023.

The Georgian media environment

Georgia's media is embedded in a partisan environment, with many outlets linked to political figures and parties. The editorial and news content of Georgian televised media is, therefore, politically polarised. Reporters Without Borders noted that while the media environment in Georgia is generally considered pluralistic, it faces serious challenges in the independence of reporting.[8] Further, Robakidze (2019) emphasises that political polarisation colours the presentation of issues and the perspectives of television viewers. The two main political party rivals—Georgian Dream (*k'art'uli oc'neba*) and the United National Movement (*ert'iani nac'ionaluri możraoba*—UNM)—are associated with important television outlets. The television channel Imedi supported the Georgian Dream presidential candidate in 2018 and has been critical of UNM.[9] Rustavi 2 favourably covered the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili and the UNM to power. Some parties, such as the Democratic Movement–United Georgia (*demokratiuli modzraoba–ert'iani sak'art'velo*) (led by Nino Burjanadze) and the Alliance of Patriots (*sakartvelos patriotta aliansi*—APG) advocate for socially conservative positions that align closely with Russian interests (Nilsson 2021). While the ownership and orientation of media outlets can change over time, their coverage tends to lean towards particular points of view.

While Georgians have access to legacy and online media, public opinion polls—including the one that we rely upon for this research—indicate that the majority of the population receives news through television networks.[10] We recognise that respondents might be influenced by a wide range of stimuli when forming their views on conspiracy theories. However, we emphasise the role of traditional televised media because, as the descriptive data in Table 1 indicate, traditional media (especially television) is by far the most widely identified source of news for Georgian citizens, as is true for other post-Soviet states (Peisakhin & Rozenas 2018).

Georgians have access to a diverse array of channels for their news. Imedi TV and Rustavi 2 together were the most viewed Georgian stations at the time of the survey (2019).[11] The survey data that we used in this analysis indicate that they were also the most trusted, with 32% of respondents identifying Imedi TV as their most trusted channel and 28%, Rustavi 2 (see Table 2). Respondents identified 11 additional stations as their most trusted, with even more channels in an 'other' category. The drop off between the top two channels and the rest, in terms of being identified as the most trusted, is substantial; the next station on the list was identified by fewer than 3% of respondents. Thus, in terms of viewership and trust, Imedi TV and Rustavi 2 were the main players for our purposes, with other stations capturing a small segment of the Georgian population.

[8]'Georgia', Reporters Without Borders, 2020, available at: https://rsf.org/en/georgia, accessed 3 May 2023.

[9]See, 'Imedi TV Pledges to Fight Against Return of UNM Regime', *Civil*, 30 October 2018, available at: https://civil.ge/archives/262629, accessed 3 May 2023.

[10]In addition to the CRRC survey, Transparency International has reported on the Georgian media environment since 2012, noting the dominance of television in information dissemination; see, 'Sakartvelos Mediagaremo 2016–2020 Tslebshi', *Transparency*, 22 October 2020, available at: https://transparency.ge/ge/post/sakartvelos-mediagaremo-2016-2020-clebshi, accessed 3 May 2023.

[11]Media viewership has since changed; see, 'Media Landscape: Georgia', *Media Landscapes*, 1 January 2018, available at: https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia/media/television, accessed 3 May 2023.

TABLE 1
MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

	Number of respondents	*% of respondents*	*% of respondents (weighted)*
Main source of information (first source)			
Family/friends/neighbours	229	8%	5%
Internet/social media	497	17%	20%
Newspapers	31	1%	1%
Radio	21	1%	<1%
Television	2,106	72%	72%
Other	6	<1%	<1%
Do not know/refused/error	37	1%	1%
Total	2,927		
Main source of information (second source)			
Receive information from only one source	812	27.7%	26.5%
Family/friends/neighbours	801	27.4%	26.5%
Internet/social media	635	21.7%	25.2%
Newspapers	171	5.8%	4.8%
Radio	45	1.5%	1.4%
Television	382	13.1%	13.4%
Other	12	0.4%	0.4%
Do not know/refused/error/skip	69	2.4%	1.9%
Total	2,927		

TABLE 2
MOST TRUSTED TELEVISION CHANNEL

Most trusted Georgian television channel	*Number of respondents*	*% of respondents*	*% of respondents (weighted)*
Imedi TV	799	27%	32%
Rustavi 2	761	26%	28%
Obieqtivi	49	2%	2%
Az TV	141	5%	3%
Armenia TV	276	9%	2%
Other	381	13%	11%
None	450	15%	19%
Refused/do not know/error	70	2%	3%
Total	2,927		

Imedi was Georgia's first private television network, founded by the oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili. Its interaction with the state has been punctuated by closures and changes in control but, in general, it has been associated with the currently dominant Georgian Dream political party. In 2007, Imedi's broadcasting was disrupted, and its ownership was appropriated by members of the former government of Saakashvili.[12] Following the electoral victory of the Georgian Dream Party in 2012, Imedi was returned to its previous owners, the Patarkatsishvili family, who had lost ownership in 2007.[13]

[12]'Telekompania "Imedi" Patarkatsishvilis ojakhs Gadaetsema', *Civil*, 17 October 2012, available at: https://civil.ge/ka/archives/151001, accessed 3 May 2023.

[13]'Vis Ekutvnis Kartuli Media', *Transparency*, 2018, available at: https://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/media_mplobeloba_1.pdf, accessed 3 May 2023.

Imedi is often accused of having a pro-regime orientation that also frames stories about Russia and the occupation of Samachablo (or South Ossetia) and Abkhazia more positively. Retrospective coverage of the August 2008 conflict illustrates editorial differences amongst broadcasters. Imedi TV discussed the repercussions of the war, focusing on the human toll. It also emphasised members of the government showing respect for those who had died in the war and the families mourning their loss.[14] By contrast, coverage on Mtavari—a new network formed by Nikolaz Gvaramia, who had headed Rustavi 2 prior to an ownership change in mid-2019—emphasised the event as Russian aggression. It showed vivid footage from the war and contextualised the war as continuing because Georgians remained displaced and efforts to extend occupied territory were ongoing.[15] Overall, Mtavari has been even bolder in its criticism of the Georgian Dream-led government than Rustavi 2 under Gvaramia.

Recent coverage of the 100th anniversary of the Soviet occupation of Georgia, commemorated on 25 February 2021, further illustrates this alleged orientation. Imedi TV coverage emphasised the historical nature of the events, using terms such as 'Sovietisation' rather than 'Russian occupation', as preferred by the strongest critics of Russia's policies towards Georgia (Gvarishvili 2020).[16] In sum, Imedi TV has been criticised for being 'softer' in news and editorial content concerning Russia than Rustavi 2 (around 2019) or Mtavari (around 2021).

Rustavi 2 also has a complicated ownership history and has been viewed as an outlet sympathetic to the UNM.[17] In 2006, the original owner of Rustavi 2, Kibar Khalvashi, lost ownership of the company and its new owners oriented programming to support then president Mikheil Saakashvili and the UNM (Menabde 2017). While its status changed in 2019, Rustavi 2 retained this orientation at the time the survey was conducted.[18] The UNM influence was particularly pronounced between 2012 and 2019, when the former vice-head of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, Nikoloz Gvaramia, served as the general manager of Rustavi 2. Under Gvaramia, the network had an anti-Russian viewpoint.

The two main television stations at the time of our analysis—Imedi TV and Rustavi 2—were privately owned stations that tended to portray events according to partisan editorial perspectives. These perspectives have been interpreted as presenting a softer (Imedi TV) or harder (Rustavi 2) line on Russia. Other stations have adopted a less nuanced presentation of events. Here we focus on Imedi TV and Rustavi 2, along with Obieqtivi, a network that has been especially notable in advancing conspiracies. Obieqtivi is a privately owned news, non-commercial television channel, founded by Irma Inashvili, a leader of the Patriots Alliance (*Sakartvelos Patriotta Aliansi*) party.[19] Obieqtivi does not

[14]'Qronika 20:00 saatze', *Imedi TV*, 8 August 2020, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFtTKGNGysU, accessed 3 May 2023.

[15]'Mtavari Shabats 9 saatze', *Mtavari TV*, 8 August 2020, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcYaDbfORCo, accessed 17 May 2023.

[16]'Sad Tsavida Batoni Bidzina', *Radio Tavisupleba*, 8 February 2021, available at: https://bit.ly/3sfxH3K, accessed 3 May 2023.

[17]See Aprasidze (2008) for a detailed discussion of the media environment.

[18]In 2015, Kibar Khalvashi appealed in court to regain ownership of Rustavi 2. On 18 July 2019, based on a European Court decision, Rustavi 2 was returned to Khalvashi. Between 2004 and 2019, Rustavi 2 was considered to be a media source controlled by the leaders of the United National Movement.

[19]See, 'Mediis Mplobelebi Sakartveloshi', *Media Checker*, 25 September 2019, available at: https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/75956-mediis-mflobelebi-saqarthveloshi%20, accessed 3 May 2023.

conceal its anti-Western rhetoric and, according to media observers, it regularly disseminates disinformation.[20] While it attracts a small audience, it directly injects an anti-Western narrative into the conversation and was actively engaged in all three examples of disinformation that we analyse in this article.

The Georgian Media Development Foundation (MDF), a non-governmental organisation that evaluates disinformation,[21] has identified some media outlets as purveyors of Russian-oriented positions on a range of issues. The organisation classifies negative stories concerning Western institutions, European advancement of LGBTQ rights and the general portrayal of the United States as a global hegemon as a part of a Russian-oriented narrative (Kintsurashvili 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019; McCain Institute 2019).[22] In MDF's reports and other scholarship (Nilsson 2021), Obieqtivi is identified as a purveyor of disinformation.

Three elements in the Russian anti-Western narrative

Our analysis focuses on three recent specific examples of disinformation efforts disseminated by Russian actors in the Russian Federation and pro-Russian proxies located in and around Georgia. It is important to emphasise that our focus is on the ways in which Russian actors amplify and spread narratives advancing their interests, including stories that we characterise as conspiracy theories. While we do not know if these stories were created by Russian actors, their origins are not critical to our argument because the narratives advance positions aligned with Russian foreign policy interests and have been amplified in Georgia.

These narratives, sometimes labelled conspiracy theories, are not unique to the region. However, prominent examples of conspiracy theories have long circulated in Eurasian societies. From the antisemitic 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' to contemporary anti-Western stories, these narratives continue to be used as an explanation for successes and failures, often identifying an outsider group as the perpetrator of misdeeds. Russian political actors propagate or amplify conspiracies to advance internal and external political goals (Yablokov 2018). A full discussion of conspiracies is beyond the scope of this article; other scholarship has addressed the phenomenon in detail (Sakwa 2012).

We focus here on three examples. Amongst contemporary conspiracy theories in Georgia, one accuses the US–Georgian Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research (named after the late US senator from Indiana, hereafter the Lugar Lab) of engaging in sinister research.[23]

[20]'Media Environment Georgia', Open Society Georgia, 2020, available at: https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Media-Environment_Georgia.pdf, accessed 3 May 2023.

[21]The organisation provides annual assessments of the media landscape and identifies traditional and online sources that have regularly disseminated anti-Western narratives. It receives funding from the United Nations and USAID for its media monitoring work.

[22]'Hey, NATO, Sad Khar?!', *Georgia and the World*, 16 March 2018, available at: http://geworld.ge/ge/%E1%83%94%E1%83%98-%E1%83%9C%E1%83%90%E1%83%A2%E1%83%9D-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%93-%E1%83%AE%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0/, accessed 3 May 2023.

[23]The initial mission of the Lugar Lab, as described by the US government, was to 'identify and report deadly pathogens before they can spread'. See, 'Lugar Applauds Opening of Nunn–Lugar Bio-Threat Laboratory in Tbilisi', Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, 17 March 2011, available at: https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/lugar-applauds-opening-of-nunn-lugar-bio-threat-laboratory-in-tbilisi-georgia, accessed 3 May 2023. The lab has been accused of spreading disease, including, most recently, COVID-19. Allegations emanate from a variety of sources, including the Russian Foreign Ministry, Russia media and NGOs (Anjaparidze 2020).

Another purports that the European Union requires Georgia to resettle Syrian refugees as a condition of improved relations. A third disinformation case ties increased cooperation between NATO and Georgia with Turkish expansion into Georgian territory *via* the establishment of NATO bases. These three cases highlight the Russian narrative of ulterior motives of the West in forging linkages with Georgia, the spectre of Georgia overrun by outsiders, and threats to the country's territorial and cultural integrity. Developing case assessments of these storylines is challenging, as they have not been covered systematically in scholarly or media publications. We investigated existing reports of these narratives, relying on several sources including academic analyses, NGO reports and online searches for media stories in Georgian and English.

Lugar Lab[24]

The Republic of Georgia and the United States signed their first agreement on biosecurity in 1997. The agreement was part of a larger initiative by US politicians to secure and eliminate weapons of mass destruction inherited from the Soviet Union. The initial plans for the Lugar Lab took shape in 2004 when Senator Richard Lugar met then-president Mikheil Saakashvili. The laboratory's first director, Ana Zhvania, indicated that conspiracies about the lab began circulating prior to its opening in 2013 and have continued to the present day (Gvarishvili 2020).[25] The lab officially opened in Tbilisi in 2013 through a cooperation agreement signed between the US and Georgian governments to enhance research on public health and biosafety. Accusations against the lab include conducting illicit medical experiments on Georgians, engaging in bioweapons research, and involvement in other nefarious activities, amidst a related false claim that Georgia refuses to sign the Biological Weapons Convention, which it had in fact signed in 1996 (NTI 2015).

Several actors inside and outside Georgia, often Russian-affiliated, have advanced rumours about the Lugar Lab's activities across platforms (Kintsurashvili 2018, 2019). Obieqtivi has been especially prolific in its reporting on the Lugar Lab, airing statements by Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Giorgi Maghlakelidze of the Alliance of Patriots; the former Georgian minister for state security, Igor Giorgadze (Ivanov 2018; Makarychev 2018), and others in attempts to implicate the facility in illicit medical experiments (Kintsurashvili 2019, pp. 27–8, 35). These comments have been supplemented by falsified documentation (Kintsurashvili 2019, pp. 40–1) allegedly proving that the lab is involved in sinister research efforts. For example, Valeri Kvaratskhelia, a member of Georgia's parliament, was reported to have stated in a 15 January 2018 broadcast on Obieqtivi, 'vaccines are produced there [Lugar

[24]The Lugar Lab is affiliated with the US Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR) as the US Army Medical Research Directorate-Georgia (USAMRD-G) and 'executes its mission of global health security by building Georgian scientific and medical capacity, monitoring disease threats with a particular focus on antibiotic resistance and using its laboratory facilities to support US and allied forces deployed within US European Command' (Cramer 2021).

[25]See also, 'Antivakseruli Modzraoba da Rusuli Propaganda', Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 5 May 2020, available at: https://idfi.ge/ge/anti-waxer_movement_and_russian_propaganda, accessed 3 May 2023.

Lab] and sent somewhere by drones and these vaccines have military purposes' (Kintsurashvili 2019, p. 21).

Exposure to the Lugar Lab conspiracy theory is not limited to Obieqtivi. Russian state-directed media have also repeatedly advanced claims that the Lugar Lab has engaged in secret bioweapons research. In 2018, Russia's *TASS* news service published a report accusing the lab of housing 'toxic agents and biological weapons'. Citing Russian General Igor Kirillov, the report alleged that 'the United States is very likely to have tested a toxic drug or a highly lethal biological agent at the Lugar Centre in Georgia under the guise of medical research'.[26] These allegations were reported in international media sources, including wire services like the Associated Press. A claim by Giorgadze that he had documents proving that 'dangerous experiments' were taking place at the lab were reported by *TASS*.[27] However, no direct evidence supporting the allegations has yet been provided, while eyewitness accounts refuting the claims are on record (Lentzos 2018).

This theme repeats several important elements of the larger Russian anti-Western narrative. In this case, cooperation with Western institutions is said to expose the Georgian people to nefarious actions threatening the health and prosperity of their country. Moreover, Western investment in Georgia cannot be trusted because it is accompanied by ulterior motives. These storyline elements are propagated and disseminated by a wide range of sources, both inside and outside Georgia, increasing the likelihood that Georgian citizens are exposed to them.

The European Union and Syrian refugees

The second disinformation theme—that EU integration would oblige Georgia to accept Syrian refugees—returns to the refrain of the West as an unreliable partner with a hidden agenda that threatens the people and territory of Georgia. This disinformation campaign exploits Georgia's status as 'a country of transit, emigration and destination' that faces internal stress because of the large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) resulting from the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Okrest 2017).[28] An obligation to settle refugees from an external conflict would create disruption in Georgian society, which already struggles with resettlement issues. This element appeals to Georgians' concerns about national security issues, not to mention their xenophobic attitudes.[29]

In a 2017 interview with *Bild*, Austria's then minister of foreign affairs, Sebastian Kurz, argued that building refugee camps at sites where Syrian refugees approach Europe would be a reasonable response to the crisis (Von Hollstein *et al*. 2017). While Kurz mentioned

[26]'Russia Wants Answers from the US, Georgia on Bioweapons at Lugar Center', *TASS*, 4 October 2018, available at: https://tass.com/defense/1024476, accessed 4 May 2023.

[27]'V Gruzii govoroli chto laboratoriya Lugara otkrita dlya Rossiiski ekspertov', *TASS*, 28 November 2019, available at: https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/7224125, accessed 4 May 2023.

[28]See also, 'Country Profile: Georgia', Migreurop, 3 January 2013, available at: http://www.migreurop.org/article2195.html?lang=fr, accessed 26 April 2023.

[29]'Some in Georgia Fear Visa Liberalization Will Lead to More Refugees', CRRC Caucasus, 17 July 2017, available at: https://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2017/07/some-in-georgia-fear-visa.html, accessed 4 May 2023.

Georgia, along with Egypt and the Balkans, as a possible site, he did not appear to be referring to a specific plan. Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, a Georgian politician and member of the Alliance of Patriots, responded that Kurz did not understand the Georgian situation and that the country was not an appropriate destination for Syrian refugees.[30] Tarkhan-Mouravi's comments implicitly elevated the speculative statement by Kurz to the level of EU policy (Sajaia 2018).

The link between EU integration and an obligation to resettle refugees spread after the Kurz/Tarkhan-Mouravi exchange. According to a statement by Ada Marshania, a member of the Alliance of Patriots, Georgian accession to the European Union would legally oblige it to accept Syrian refugees.[31] Online media, identified as Russian disinformation websites, reiterated this storyline (Dempsey 2016).[32] Russian media sources, most notably *Sputnik*, emphasised that closer ties with the West would require Georgia to accept migrants, particularly refugees from Syria and other strife-torn countries of the Middle East and Africa (Kintsurashvili 2019, pp. 15–6, 31).[33] Obieqtivi and other information outlets with a pro-Russian bias predicted that if Georgia increased its connections with the European Union, Georgians would lose not only their cultural and religious values but also their land and identity. Similar to the Lugar Lab conspiracy theory, this narrative creates a false connection between stronger EU ties and purported requirements to resettle refugees circulated in Georgia *via* politicians associated with particular pro-Russian/anti-Western parties, specific media outlets and external media sources based in Russia.

Turkey and NATO expansion

Our third disinformation example is connected to a longstanding Russian objective: to curtail the expansion of NATO to formerly Soviet or Soviet-bloc states (Frederick *et al*. 2017). As recently as 2018, then Russian Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev publicly stated that admitting Georgia into NATO 'could trigger a terrible conflict', echoing prior statements by President Vladimir Putin (Osborn 2018). Despite that concern, dating back to the early post-independence period, Georgia has increasingly aligned itself with the United States and NATO (Toal 2017, pp. 107–10). While

[30]'Iseti Gantsda Makvs, rom Sebastian Kurtsis ar Esmis Ra Vitarebaa Sakartveloshi', *iPress*, 6 March 2017, available at: https://ipress.ge/new/tharkhan-mouraviisethi-gan/, accessed 18 May 2023.

[31]'"Patriotebis" dezinformacia: vizaliberalizaciis safasuri sirieli ltolvilebis migebaa', *Mitebis det'ekt'oriap'rili*, 3 April 2018, available at: https://mythdetector.ge/ka/patriottha-dezinphormatsia-vizaliberalizatsiis-saphasuri-sirieli-ltolvilebis-mighebaa/, accessed 29 June 2023.

[32]See also, 'Informacia, Titkos Evrokavshirtan Readmisiis Shesakheb Gapormebuli Khelshekruleba Sakartvelos Sirieli Ltolvilebis Mighebas Avaldebulebs, Mtsdaria', *Mythdetector*, 5 February 2016, available at: https://mythdetector.ge/ka/inphormatsia-thithqos-evrokavshirthan-readmisiis-shesakheb-gaphormebuli-shethankhmeba-saqarthvelos-siriel-ltolviltha-mighebas-avaldebulebs-mtsdaria/, accessed 4 May 2023.

[33]'Austrian FM Suggests Setting Up Refugee Centers in Georgia, Western Balkans', *Sputnik*, 3 May 2017, available at: https://sputnikglobe.com/20170305/eu-refugee-camps-georgia-western-balkans-1051275662.html, accessed 4 May 2023; see also, 'Tchkoidze: Sakartvelom Ar Unda Miigos Sirieli Ltolvilebi', *Sputnik*, 8 March 2017, available at: https://sputnik-georgia.com/20170308/chkoidze-saqartvelom-ar-unda-miigos-sirieli-ltolvilebi-235129455.html, accessed 4 May 2023.

NATO has not yet signalled a clear path to full membership for Georgia, the Alliance has granted it partnership status and, to an appreciable extent, integrated it into NATO's military structure. Georgian troops have deployed in support of NATO's missions and incurred significant casualties as a result.

A 2019 poll in Georgia by the CRRC and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) showed that 78% of respondents supported Georgia's accession to NATO (NDI 2019). Not surprisingly, given the popularity of NATO membership in Georgia, decreasing public support for Georgia's bid for NATO membership is a crucial Russian foreign policy goal (Frederick *et al*. 2017). One vector through which Russia might influence public opinion on this specific point is Georgia's relationship with Turkey, a longstanding NATO member. While there have been tensions related to identity and territory in the Georgian–Turkish relationship (Pelkmans 2006), the two countries have recently enjoyed better relations. Amongst the many claims about NATO, the MDF identified several instances in which the media warned about the potential intervention of Turkish military forces and the establishment of a Turkish base within Georgia (Kintsurashvili 2018, pp. 11–2, 16; 2019, p. 14). External actors also echoed this line. Reports in Georgian- and Russian-language online news outlets highlighted the claims of Shirak Torosyan, a member of the Armenia parliament, that NATO expansion would lead not only to Turkish military deployment but also efforts by the Armenian minority in Georgia to secede. This story was reported in several Georgian- and Russian-language online news sources.[34]

The discussions of the three narratives and their potential resonance amongst Georgians led us to the two hypotheses that we investigate in this article. Our hypotheses emphasise how trust in the Georgian media and exposure to Russian media is associated with the propensity to believe the Lugar Lab, Syrian refugee and Turkish base narratives.[35] The first hypothesis is that respondents who trust domestic television channels associated with Russian disinformation or pro-Russian bias (such as Obieqtivi) are more likely to exhibit higher acceptance of conspiracy theories advanced by Russian disinformation (namely, those concerning the Lugar Lab, Syrian refugees and a Turkish base in Georgia).

[34]'Samtskhe-Kavakhetis Somkhebi Sakartvelo Natoshi Gatsevrianebis Semtkhvevashi damoukideblobas moitxoven', *Kavakazplus*, 22 April 2019, available at: https://ge.kavkazplus.com/news.php?id=23673&.XP0WR6jVLIU#.ZFOv_-zMJAc, accessed 24 May 2023.

[35]Our discussion of the three narratives does not encompass all Russian-affiliated media dissemination of these storylines. For example, *Sputnik*, a Russian state-owned news agency, has also addressed these narratives in its English-language coverage. It has covered the Lugar Lab conspiracy, adding a tag to its website specifically for stories about the lab, see for example: 'Russia is Concerned Over US Biological Activities in Georgia', *Sputnik*, 19 December 2018, available at: https://sputnikglobe.com/20181219/russia-us-lab-1070814362.html, accessed 4 May 2023. A story reviewing the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia referred to supposed European plans to build a refugee centre in Georgia (see, 'Nine Years After Georgia–Russia War, "NATO Hustle in Caucasus Looks Suspicious"', *Sputnik*, 8 August 2017, available at: https://sputnikglobe.com/20170808/us-georgia-russia-war-1056288932.html, accessed 4 May 2023). We did not find a direct reference to the Turkish base controversy, but critical pieces about NATO were widespread, including the story just referenced. These examples illustrate that the stories are disseminated by many sources.

The second hypothesis is that respondents who access Russian television are more likely to exhibit higher acceptance of conspiracy theories advanced by Russian disinformation (namely, those concerning the Lugar Lab, Syrian refugees and a Turkish base).

Data and analysis

Data

The CRRC conducted a nationally representative, in-person survey of 2,927 Georgian adults in April 2019.[36] The survey was supported by the National Democratic Institute and UK Aid as part of a series of public opinion polls initiated in 2014. The survey includes an intentional over-sample of regions with high proportions of ethnic minorities (Armenians and Azeri); we incorporated adjustments based on primary sample unit (PSU) and household selection probabilities of inclusion results weighted to compensate for this survey design element.[37]

This survey provides data on a wide range of issues, including specific questions concerning individual beliefs in the three specific conspiracy theories discussed above: the Lugar Lab,[38] Syrian refugee resettlement and a purported Turkish military base.[39] Respondents were asked to reply 'true', 'false' or 'do not know' to the following statements:

1. The US sponsored Lugar Lab in Georgia contributes to the spread of epidemics.
2. EU integration obliges Georgia to receive Syrian refugees.
3. If Georgia joins NATO, the Turkish army will establish a military base in Samtskhe Javakheti (a region in southern Georgia bordering Turkey).

Our assessments intentionally included 'do not know' responses, which represent the plurality response. The nuances of 'do not know' answers have been discussed extensively in the survey literature, including by a study focusing on post-Soviet countries (Naylor & O'Loughlin 2021). Researchers have found that some respondents indicate 'do not know' to reflect a lack of knowledge. Other respondents, however, may choose 'do not know' because they are unsure, confused or sensitive to issues they consider risky or traumatic, especially in post-conflict situations such as Georgia. An information operations mission, from the Russian perspective, would be successful not only by convincing Georgians that the false storylines are true, but also by sowing

[36]The original data are available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/downloads/. The questionnaire and data are available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/downloads/NDI_April_2019_Questionnaire_EN.pdf (questionnaire); https://caucasusbarometer.org/downloads/NDI_2019_April_22.04.19_Public.dta (data). The original survey was sponsored by the National Democratic Institute and UK Aid. Neither organisation is responsible for our interpretations or findings.

[37]The survey uses a weighting approach commonly employed by CRRC.

[38]CRRC posted a blog with preliminary analysis about the Lugar Lab conspiracy: 'Who is Afraid of the Lugar Centre?', CRRC, 9 July 2019, available at: http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2019/07/who-is-afraid-of-lugar-centre.html, accessed 4 May 2023.

[39]This battery of questions included a fourth about the orientation of Georgia's market. This question, which did not specifically address a conspiracy tied to a media proliferation campaign, was however not included in this analysis.

enough uncertainty that false stories are treated as possible. Although we could not differentiate respondents in these two categories, we did not omit 'do not know' responses in case they provided additional insights.

Analysis

Our main research questions emphasise how exposure to media identified as advancing a 'pro-Russian' narrative may be associated with stronger beliefs in the three conspiracy theories. Our analysis proceeds in two parts. The first part consists of descriptive data drawn from the survey, displaying respondents' attitudes about the conspiracies according to their orientation to specific news sources. The second part of the analysis is described here and presented in detail in the online appendix. It consists of a multivariate analysis that supports the conclusions we draw from the descriptive data but provides additional nuance to the interpretation.

Table 3 shows the overall distribution of responses to the three conspiracy questions in the survey, indicating the general orientation towards the narratives. For the Lugar Lab narrative, 22% of respondents (weighted) believed it to be true, 38% believed it was false and 40% indicated that they did not know. For the Syrian refugee question, 18% (weighted) indicated that it was true, 35% believed it was false and 46% did not know. The Turkish base question yielded the lowest proportion of respondents who believed it was true (11% weighted), with 41% indicating it was false and 48% stating that they did not know. We suggest that the Lugar Lab storyline, as a simpler story and thus a more relatable threat, has received far more media coverage than the other two specific conspiracies, whereas the Turkish basing issue requires connecting different threatening elements to arrive at a level of concern sufficient to accept that false narrative (namely, NATO membership would strengthen relations with Turkey, subsequently developing an expectation that Turkish troops are to be permitted to establish a base). While the majority—or even plurality of respondents—did not indicate belief in the conspiracy theories, each theory was supported by a substantial segment of the population. Moreover, more respondents were unsure about the veracity of these stories than disbelieved them.

Figures 1–3 illustrate how attitudes about the media are related to beliefs about the conspiracies. Specifically, all three figures show the percentage of individuals in each response category, divided between those who identified a specific media outlet (Rustavi, Imedi and Obieqtivi) as their most trusted source and those who did not. The results on the left side of the figure show the responses of respondents who did not identify the named news source as their most trusted source; the results on the right show the results for those who did.

Figure 1 displays results for the Lugar Lab conspiracy question. The most glaring difference in respondents' attitudes was associated with Obieqtivi. Amongst respondents who identified Obieqtivi as their most trusted source, 42.1% believed the Lugar Lab story was true. Amongst those who did not identify it as their most trusted source, only 21.5% believed the conspiracy was true. The proportion of respondents who thought the narrative was false or who did not know was also lower amongst those who trusted Obieqtivi.

TABLE 3
BELIEF IN DISINFORMATION STORYLINES

	Lugar Lab			*Syrian refugees*			*Turkish base*		
	Number of respondents	*% of respondents*	*% of respondents (weighted)*	*Number of respondents*	*% of respondents*	*% of respondents (weighted)*	*Number of respondents*	*% of respondents*	*% of respondents (weighted)*
True	603	21	22	530	18	18	375	13	11
False	1,072	37	38	1,006	34	35	1,097	37	41
Do not know	1,232	42	40	1,366	47	46	1,428	49	48
Other non-response	20	<1	<1	25	<1	<1	27	<1	<1
Total	2,927			2,927			2,927		

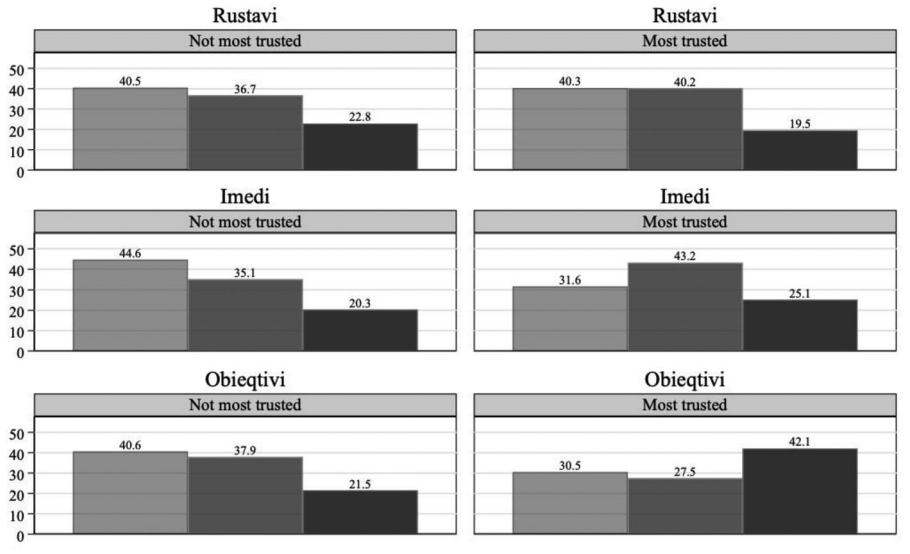

FIGURE 1. BELIEF IN THE LUGAR LAB CONSPIRACY BY TRUST IN GEORGIAN MEDIA SOURCES (%)

Notes: The graphs display the weighted percentage of respondents who indicated that they believed the Lugar Lab conspiracy was true (black bar), false (dark grey bar) or that they did not know (light grey bar), separated by their orientation towards the news source identified in the graph. Values on the right are for respondents who identified the named news source as their most trusted source. Values on the left are for all other respondents. The values sum to 100% within each category (most/not most trusted).

The differences in attitudes amongst respondents identifying Imedi as their most trusted source were smaller than Obieqtivi but still notable: 25.1% of those who trusted Imedi believed the conspiracy. Amongst respondents who did not list Imedi as the most trusted source, 20.3% believed the narrative. In contrast to Obieqtivi, a higher proportion of respondents who trusted Imedi also believed that the Lugar Lab story was false, relative to those who trusted a different media outlet. The difference for respondents who trusted Rustavi were smaller and in the opposite direction: a lower proportion of respondents who viewed Rustavi as the most trusted source also believed the Lugar conspiracy was true relative to those who identified another source as most trusted. A slightly higher proportion of individuals who trusted Rustavi also believed that the conspiracy was false.

Figure 2 shows a similar orientation of respondents to the Syrian refugee narrative. Individuals who trusted Obieqtivi the most were more likely to indicate that they believed Georgia would be obliged to resettle refugees (43.5%) than those who trusted another source (18.0%). A lower percentage of respondents who trusted Obieqtivi also believed the storyline was false (30.9% compared to 35.9% of those who trusted a different source). A slightly higher percentage of individuals who trusted Imedi were more likely to believe the refugee narrative (19.3% compared to 18.1%). The gap was larger amongst those who believed the story was false: 41.0% who trusted Imedi did not believe the conspiracy; 33.3% of respondents who trusted a different source believed it was false. Media consumers who trusted Rustavi more than other news sources were less likely to

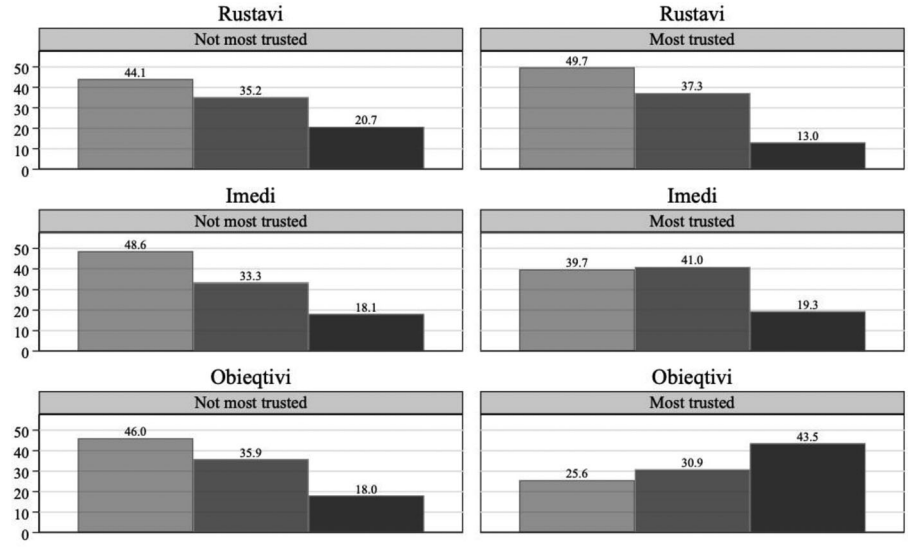

FIGURE 2. BELIEF IN THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CONSPIRACY BY TRUST IN GEORGIAN MEDIA SOURCES

Notes: The graphs display the weighted percentage of respondents who indicated that they believed the Syrian Refugee conspiracy was true (black bar), false (dark grey bar) or that they did not know (light grey bar), separated by their orientation towards the news source identified in the graph. Values on the right are for respondents who identified the named news source as their most trusted one. Values on the left are for all other respondents. The values sum to 100% within each category (most/not most trusted).

believe the refugee storyline than those who trusted other sources (13.0% compared to 20.7%). They were also slightly more likely to disbelieve the story or to not know.

The Turkish base conspiracy, illustrated in Figure 3, is in line with these interpretations. Most notably, a substantially higher proportion of respondents who trusted Obieqtivi believed the conspiracy; a slightly higher proportion of respondents who trusted Imedi believed it; and a lower proportion of respondents who trusted Rustavi believed that NATO accession would result in the establishment of a Turkish base. All three figures provide preliminary evidence supporting the first hypothesis.

These data suggest that trust in Obieqtivi was associated with a greater likelihood of believing the conspiracies. Trust in Imedi was associated with more confidence about both the veracity and falsity of the narratives. Trust in Rustavi was connected with a slightly higher percentage of respondents who believed that the narrative was false and a slightly lower percentage who believed it to be true. The interpretation of these data requires several caveats. While Obieqtivi's orientation and its broadcasting of these conspiracies are well-documented, its impact on the media landscape is small; as Table 2 notes, only 2% of respondents identified Obieqtivi as their most trusted source. Further, as we noted above, we cannot determine from the available data if the individuals who trusted Obieqtivi had been influenced by its coverage or if a pre-existing orientation towards belief in these narratives had influenced them to trust a media source that confirmed their worldview. Nevertheless, the association between this media source and

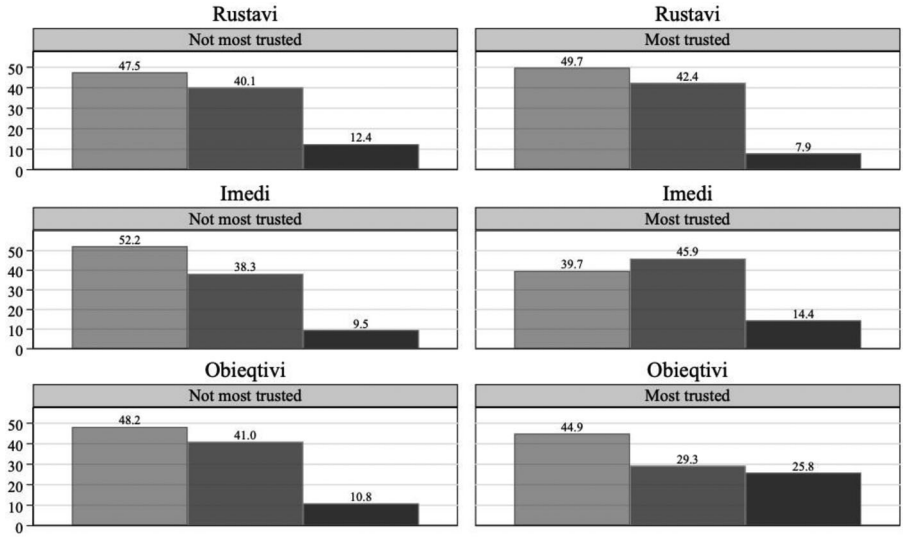

FIGURE 3. BELIEF IN THE TURKISH BASE CONSPIRACY BY TRUST IN GEORGIAN MEDIA SOURCES

Notes: The graphs display the weighted percentage of respondents who indicated that they believed the Turkish Base conspiracy was true (black bar), false (dark grey bar) or that they did not know (light grey bar), separated by their orientation towards the news source identified in the graph. Values on the right are for respondents who identified the named news source as their most trusted one. Values on the left are for all other respondents. The values sum to 100% within each category (most/not most trusted).

conspiracy narratives is strong. Imedi has a much wider viewership but, as we also noted, its connection to pro-Russian narratives is more circumstantial: Imedi has been accused of a more sympathetic orientation towards Russian interests and has aired material that accords with this orientation. However, the evidence does not permit us to label it definitively as a purveyor of pro-Russian conspiracies like Obieqtivi. It is not surprising that this softer association with these narratives yields a weaker empirical connection; while respondents who trusted Imedi the most were more inclined to believe the conspiracy storylines than those who trusted other media, the difference is smaller. Finally, those viewers who trusted Rustavi the most were the least inclined to believe the conspiracies but also had the highest 'do not know' responses.

In addition to their trust of Georgian television, survey respondents were also asked if they watched coverage of news and current affairs on non-Georgian television channels. A sizable segment of respondents, 540 (18%), indicated that they did.[40] Of those respondents, 402 identified a Russian source such as RT, ORT, RTR, REN TV, Russia 1, Russia 24, TV Centre, RTV, NTV and TNT. We further explore how exposure to Russian television is associated with beliefs in the conspiracies in Figure 4.

[40]Amongst respondents, 540 (18%) indicated that they watched news on non-Georgian channels, 2,274 (78%) indicated they did not and 113 (4%) did not provide an answer.

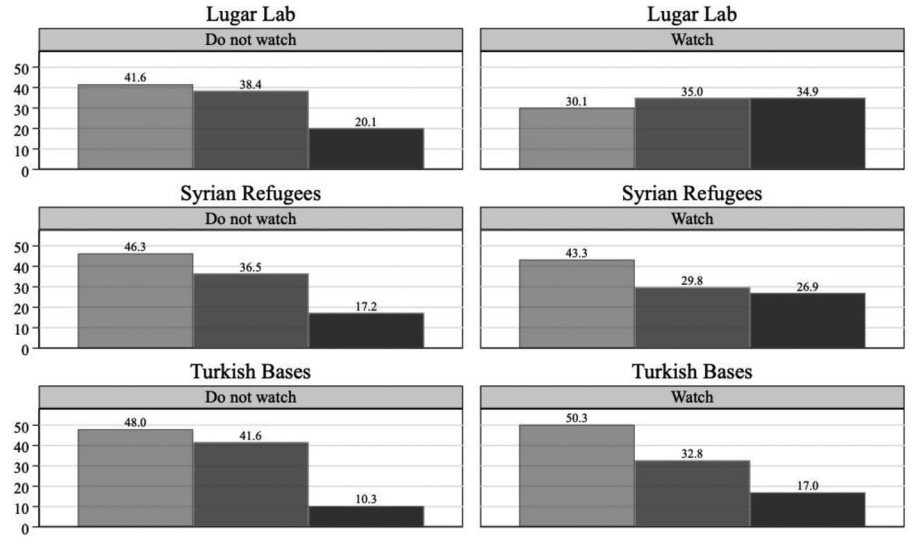

FIGURE 4. BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY BY EXPOSURE TO RUSSIAN MEDIA

Notes: The graphs display the weighted percentage of respondents who indicated that they believed the specific conspiracy was true (black bar), false (dark grey bar) or that they do not know (light grey bar), separated by their reported viewership of Russian television. Values on the right are for respondents who indicated that they watched at least one of the Russian television stations noted in the survey. Values on the left are for respondents who did not identify a Russian news source. The values sum to 100% within each category (watch/do not watch).

The figure displays the percentage of respondents in each response category for the three conspiracy narratives. In all three cases, respondents who watched Russian television were more likely to believe the conspiracies—and less likely to believe they were false—than those who did not watch Russian television. The difference was greatest for the Lugar Lab, followed by the Syrian refugees and, lastly, the Turkish bases. As our evaluation of the conspiracy narratives showed, Russian media aired these stories, meaning that respondents who viewed Russian television were more likely to be exposed to them and, potentially, to accept them. Once again, we cannot fully determine the direction of the causal arrow in these cases, but the association appears to be strong. These observations support the second hypothesis.

The descriptive data displayed in the figures suggest that trust in certain Georgian media outlets and exposure to Russian television broadcasts are connected to a belief that the conspiracy narratives are true. In our online appendix, we conduct a more extensive analysis of the phenomenon to account for alternate explanations. In the analysis, we include variables that identify additional outcomes for the media trust question, account for internet use, incorporate partisanship and control for socio-demographic features (age, gender, education, employment). These analyses largely confirm the findings from the descriptive data and provide some additional nuance. When we controlled for other features, viewers who trusted Obieqtivi, along with those who watched Russian television, remained more likely to believe the three conspiracy narratives. However, the addition of controls suggests that the differences that we viewed amongst respondents who most trusted Imedi do not rise

to the level of statistical significance, except in the case of the Turkish base narrative. The descriptive data also show small differences in the effects of exposure to Imedi; individuals who trusted Imedi may have been more likely to believe some conspiracy narratives, but this tendency is not as consistent as trust in Obieqtivi or viewership of Russian television. In general, respondents who trusted Rustavi exhibited a different orientation towards the conspiracies; a smaller proportion believed that the conspiracies were true and a larger proportion believed they were false. While these results provide some insights into beliefs in anti-Western conspiracies amongst Georgians, they demonstrate that more research is needed to uncover the connections between propaganda narratives, exposure and the belief structure of individuals in the Republic of Georgia.

Conclusion

This article assessed how disinformation narratives affect public opinion. We established why political operatives in the Russian Federation might use disinformation campaigns generally, and particularly in Georgia. We further identified three specific conspiracy theories that have been promulgated by politicians and the media inside Georgia, Russia and elsewhere. Given these conditions, we asked if exposure to media that presented a Russian-oriented position was associated with belief in the three specific conspiracy theories. Our analysis of survey data demonstrated that, with caveats, respondents who trusted Georgian media with a pro-Russian bias and/or were exposed to Russian television were more likely to accept the conspiracy theories, suggesting that Russian disinformation efforts might be moderately successful in persuading some Georgian citizens.

The results further suggest that Russia's dissemination of this type of disinformation may reap geopolitical rewards amongst a segment of Georgian citizens. Our findings speak to a growing interest in how disinformation, particularly state-sponsored disinformation, is propagated. Further, although much of the existing research on disinformation vectors focuses on online social media, in some countries, such as Georgia, legacy media such as television remains the principal means by which citizens follow the news. Thus, watching networks sympathetic to the Russian view is associated with belief in specific conspiracy theories supporting the larger Russian geopolitical narratives.

While our research provides preliminary support for the interpretation that third-party disinformation campaigns can be effective, more research is needed. Although scholars have previously addressed questions related to disinformation, the area is nevertheless under-researched, due in part to the challenges of establishing causation. We are limited by our cross-sectional data: we cannot delineate patterns of opinion change and media consumption across time, a factor that assumes even more significance in view of events in Georgia post-2019. Certainly, for example, we would like to know if and how opinions regarding the Lugar Lab have changed since the advent of COVID-19. Not surprisingly, Russian disinformation outlets and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the Lugar Lab was instrumental in spreading the virus, including using it in a weaponised form against the secessionist *de facto* states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Anjaparidze 2020). Fortunately, the NDI and CRRC (again supported by the National Democratic Institute and UK Aid) conducted a survey in June 2020 probing that conspiracy theory, finding that 60% of respondents did not believe that the Lugar Lab was involved in

developing the virus for use against Russia, higher than the 38% who rejected the 2019 Lugar Lab conspiracy (NDI 2020). Although not exactly the same question that was asked regarding the Lugar Lab in 2019, the higher level of conspiracy rejection is noteworthy and arguably owing, in part, to the early success of the Georgian government in containing the virus at that time. Indeed, NDI noted that 'swift and evidence-based government action on COVID-19 has built public trust on these issues' (NDI 2020).

Further study into how the contextual effects of proximity, shared cultural or linguistic capacity, and perceived levels of informativeness is warranted to clarify specific factors and experimental design elements that directly connect exposure to a specific narrative from a named source with attitudes about conspiracies. The associational relationships that we identified should be further tested to evaluate if a more direct connection between exposure to narratives, along with trust in the source of narratives, affects respondents. It would also be valuable to explore how and if these findings apply to other parts of post-Soviet space. Despite these limitations, our ability to focus on three precise cases of disinformation linked to Russian interventions occurring over a relatively short time frame affords valuable insights into how attitudes sweep across populations and the individual characteristics amplifying or dampening the attraction of the message. Future research, focusing on longitudinal data, is clearly justified and can contribute significantly to our understanding of disinformation in the post-Soviet space and beyond.

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