Natia Seskuria **Georgia: Based on: An Unusual Suspect: Georgia as a Success Case in Addressing the Coronavirus Challenge**

https://rusi.org/commentary/unusual-suspect-georgia-success-case-addressing-corona-virus-challenge; https://stopcov.ge/en; http://georgiatoday.ge/news/20632/Should-the-World-Sacrifice-the-Economy-to-Save-Lives-Today%3F

Should the World Sacrifice the Economy to Save Lives Today? - Georgia Today on the Web

"Small country, Big effort" a commentator's description Georgia's fight against COVID-19.

Nestled between Turkey, Russia and Azerbaijan, Georgia's population is 3.7 million (2017 estimate), with land area just under 70,000 square kilometres. (The comparative UK figures are 66 million people and 242,000 square kilometres, 18 times Georgia's population in just 3 times the area.) In coronavirus as in tourism, Georgia remains largely unexplored. Telecomdrive Bureau. 2020. "Small Country, Big Effort: How Georgia Is Fighting COVID-19 Telecom Drive." Telecom Drive. May 12, 2020. https://telecomdrive.com/small-country-big-effort-how-georgia-is-fighting-COVID-19-19/; https://www.finchannel.com/opinion/opinion-2/77914-the-responses-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-the-rationale-and-some-observations   http://georgiatoday.ge/ https://geotimes.com.ge/

Georgia's COVID-19 path has been widely praised.

On 22 January, the head of the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control warned Georgian travellers not to visit Wuhan in China, stating that there is a "small, but theoretical" chance that the virus could reach Georgia. The virus did indeed arrive on 26 February, and a swift government response followed. This gave the healthcare system some time to mobilise for the imminent outbreak, and time to learn from the experience of other countries. Immediately after the first confirmed case there was some panic buying but this soon abated when it became clear that supplies were under control.

EARLY REACTION

It was as early as January 2020, when the Interagency Coordination Council was launched to mitigate and contain the threat of coronavirus. The Council is led by the Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia. At the time, hardly anyone anticipated that the virus which emerged from Wuhan would hit the rest of the world with such intensity. Yet, the reaction from the Georgian Government was swift and, as it turns out, timely. Georgia took preventive measures by suspending flights from China, before doing the same with Iran, which became a hotspot by the end of February. Enjoying the perks of visa liberalisation with the EU, Italy has been one of the top European destinations for Georgian tourists. By the end of February, Italy became the worst affected country in the EU. The Georgian Government immediately reacted by sending everyone returning from Italy either to designated 'quarantine hotels' or to self-isolation for 14 days followed by restricting the air traffic between the two countries. Well before then, Georgia was one of the first countries to implement strict airport checks for every person entering the country, a simple measure that proved to be efficient in detecting infected individuals. The media campaign in

conjunction with the creation of a dedicated impressive 6-language website, *stopcov.ge*, aimed to raise public awareness about the gravity of the crisis that Georgians could face. As an advisory body to the prime minister, the National Security Council and its Office play a key role, making sure that inter-agency coordination is at its highest level and crisis management measures are effectively implemented.

Georgia took early action to stop flights from China, but the virus entered via Iran and Italy. The Georgian Government reacted immediately by quarantining everyone returning from Italy to designated 'quarantine hotels' or to self-isolation for 14 days. Well before then, Georgia had implemented strict airport checks for everyone entering the country, a simple measure that proved to be efficient in detecting infected individuals.

As of 12 May, 4769 Georgians were in 14-day compulsory quarantine – over 1 in 1000 of the population. There had been 639 confirmed cases, of whom 349 have recovered and 11 have died. The success in mitigating the spread and ensuring a low death rate is not an accident. Due to a string of strategic decisions, Georgia is an example not only to the region, but to the world, proving that efficient crisis management does not necessarily require vast amounts of resources.

Georgia is far from winning its war against the pandemic. One key challenge is resistance from the Georgian Church which may cause a significant spread of the virus. Additionally, for a country that is heavily reliant on tourism the post-coronavirus era will be full of economic hardships and challenges. Still, the praise that Georgia received from the WHO for its response to coronavirus is well-deserved and could serve as an example for other countries.

CORRECT MESSAGING

Crisis communication is another key element of the successful implementation of such extraordinary decisions in democracies. Prime Minister Gakharia, figures from his Cabinet, and top medical experts made sure decisions and recommendations made by the Interagency Coordination Council were clearly explained. Although immediately after the

first confirmed case Georgians resorted to panic buying in pharmacies and supermarkets, that soon abated when it became clear that supplies were under control.

Subsequently, the ground was prepared for declaring a state-of-emergency, with nurseries, schools and universities closed and teaching handled by digital platforms. Cultural and sports events were canceled and restaurants and bars were shut. The border was closed for inbound travel, with the exception for Georgians that were being airlifted from around the world. Most importantly, the reinforcement of measures was in line with recommendations set out by the healthcare professionals from the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control. Gakharia's decision to count on a 'heavy artillery' of measures shows that in times of a major health crisis, the government can successfully become a support mechanism to implement recommendations made by professionals. Georgian health experts were even bold enough to alter some of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommendations by tailoring them to a Georgian setting.

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

The most vulnerable Georgian areas remain those in the Russian-occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Russia left residents of the occupied regions to face the health emergency on their own, the Georgian government offered to help Abkhazians and South Ossetians be tested and diagnosed properly at the Lugar Public Health Research Centre in Tbilisi, as well as granting full access to treatment, as they lack basic healthcare needs under Russian occupation.

It was the US-funded Lugar Centre that was targeted by Russian propaganda in 2018 when claims were made that the US uses the lab to perform illegal experiments and develop viruses. But the outbreak has shown the limits of Russian propaganda and the strategic importance of the medical facility. The Lugar Centre is on the front line of the fight against coronavirus in Georgia, by providing the diagnosis within an extremely short time and tracing the viral spread. At such times, it is difficult to dispute the pivotal role of a leading scientific research centre – even for those who have been inclined to believe Russian disinformation.

Georgia is far from winning its war against the pandemic, as the curve is not expected to flatten any time soon. The key challenge is the resistance from the Georgian Church to make restrictions for the upcoming Easter celebrations, which may cause a significant spread of the virus. Additionally, for a country that is heavily reliant on tourism the post-coronavirus era will be full of economic hardships and challenges. Still, the praise that Georgia received from the WHO for its response to coronavirus is well-deserved and could serve as an example for other countries.