

Russian propaganda war: media as a long- and short-range weapon

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The war between Russia and Georgia, which for Moscow was an attempt to significantly improve its international position, was accompanied by an unprecedented campaign in the media launched in support of the efforts of the Russian government, both diplomatic and military. The campaign, which had been carried out on a grand scale and was extremely aggressive, was aiming precise propaganda messages at both the foreign and domestic audience. The main task for the Russian media was to emphasise the rebirth of Russia as a powerful country, which was strong, assertive, had clearly defined interests and was determined to defend them. Another simultaneous purpose of the propaganda was to show the weakness of the Western world and to emphasise the divides existing there. One more temporary, albeit important, goal was the complete discrediting of Georgia and demonstration of the failure of its pro-Western ambitions. Inside Russia, the propaganda was aimed at building up the image of the most senior public figures and at giving legitimacy to the war. This objective had regularly been used to gain public support for the increasingly more aggressive actions taken by the authorities in the past. Russian society's receptiveness to propaganda has proven once again that media is one of the key weapons in the Kremlin's soft power arsenal, which is skilfully used to achieve the goals of the Russian government.

The scale of the propaganda campaign

The media campaign which accompanied the Russian-Georgian conflict was one of the largest and most aggressive such operations launched in Russia since 2000. The scale, intensity and emotional burden of the campaign together with the chance to draw a uniform and consistent picture of the situation significantly outdid previous such media efforts as those related to the sinking of the Kursk submarine or the terrorist attacks against the Dubrovka Theatre and the Beslan school (all of which occurred during Vladimir Putin's term of office). The 'standardisation' of the propaganda activities mainly results from the fact that Russian authorities have, for a long time, controlled all major media, especially the popular TV stations, which are watched by most Russians.

The goals of the campaign

The main goal which the Russian government pursued during the conflict and after the end of its military phase was to **present Russia as a powerful country, which was strong, assertive, had clearly defined its interests and was determined to defend them**. By building this image both through military activity and media broadcasts, Russia was trying to challenge the widespread belief in the global leadership of the United States. Russian politicians and media presented the conflict first of all as an act of rivalry between Russia & the USA and emphasised that their interests and policy were directly opposed to those of the USA. Vladimir Putin openly claimed, in an interview for CNN on 28 August, that the USA had played a causative role in the conflict by saying that the conflict had been provoked by Washington in order to promote one of the candidates in the US presidential election (which was an obvious reference to John McCain). Russian spokesmen emphasised the weakening of the US position; Mikhail Leontiev, the top commentator for Channel 1 of Russian TV, speaking during prime time on 27 August, said, "America is in fact bankrupt, and all its recent shenanigans have been aimed at covering up that bankruptcy".

The desire to show US weakness was related to emphasising the deepening divides in the West, both between the European Union and the United States and inside the EU itself. Russian media focused on contradictory opinions presented by individual leaders of EU member states concerning Russia; the state-owned TV station *Vesti* concluded after the 1 September European Union summit that, "the anti-Russian coalition of Poland and the Baltic states has not managed to convince the EU to impose sanctions on Russia". Government-controlled media selected foreign opinions in a biased way by presenting the opinions of Italian or German politicians who were favourably disposed to Russia (among others, the Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, who warned the EU against forging 'anti-Russian coalitions'). Another example was Mateusz Piskorski, former Polish Self-Defence Party MP (who has been outside the parliament since 2007), presented as the head of the Polish section of the European Geopolitical Analysis Centre, who was trying to prove that not only the European Union but also Poland were far from unanimity about Russia. Some media outlets even used such tricks as emphasising the fact that the US embassy in Moscow (unlike, for example, the British embassy) had not lowered their flag on the day of national mourning announced by President Medvedev (Interfax, 13 August 2008).

A temporary goal, ancillary to that described previously, was the **complete discrediting and isolation of the Georgian government (also inside Georgia)**. The country was presented as a puppet aggressor which was subservient to US interests and had violated both international law and human rights. At the beginning of the conflict, the Russian media totally negated the Georgian state and its policy. However, some time later, the distinction was made in Russia between the regime of the 'political corpse Saakashvili' (as President Medvedev called him on 3 September), which Russia disregarded and did not intend to negotiate with, and the Georgian nation to whom Moscow started addressing positive messages (on 7 September, Medvedev announced, "our attitude towards the Georgian nation has not changed and is still warm and brotherly"). This propaganda strategy fitted in with the goal which Russia had pursued since the beginning of the conflict, namely **the abolition of the government in Tbilisi, which was unfavourably disposed to Moscow**. Now that Saakashvili has to give an account of his actions, Russia seems to have intensified such propaganda efforts and appears to be giving signs of a desire to reach an understanding with potential rivals of the Georgian president.

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At the same time, Russian politicians and media attempted to give **the impression that the 'partition' of Georgia carried out by Russia was irrevocable**. This was even expressed in the terminology used in the Russian media and by politicians. Russians stopped using the Georgian versions of the names of places in the separatist republics; thus 'Tskhinval' became the only proper name of the place previously known as 'Tskhinvali', and 'Sukhumi' started to be called 'Sukhum'.

In addition to the geopolitical tasks, the operation launched in the media was also aimed **at reinforcing the pride of Russian society arising from the confirmation of their country's status as a significant power**. At the same time, it was intended to build up the image of Russian senior officials (both Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev) as successful defenders of the oppressed fraternal nations on the one hand and the status of Russia as a powerful country on the other. Adding legitimacy to the war is also a proven method for the Russian authorities to get practically unlimited public support for their increasingly aggressive actions in pursuit of their personal interests.

The characteristics of the campaign

An analysis of the general message presented in the Russian media (including the Internet) has indicated the existence of a **virtually uniform information front** in Russia, with very few exceptions. This resulted from the government's strong direct control of the mass media (giving guidelines to the media) and of socio-political life (unwillingness of the media and commentators to present an independent minority voice on issues of such significance for the government), as well as from the Russian control of South Ossetian territory and information coming from there. In addition to the media which has been under the Kremlin's control for a long time (TV, a significant part of the press and selected websites), a moderately pro-government point of view was also presented (especially at the beginning of the conflict) by some journalists in the media known for their independent and oppositionist stance (e.g. the Ekho Moskvyy radio station and some websites, e.g. newsru.com).

The following proven techniques were used in the media campaign:

- one-sidedness of the message; the television showed only the suffering of the Ossetian people and shocked the audience with atrocities committed by Georgian troops;
- information blockade; in the early stage of the conflict, Russians, who controlled South Ossetian territory, in fact held a monopoly on information on the conflict and skilfully 'filtered' the information, e.g. by refusing access to the conflict area for non-Russian journalists. This problem coincided with the Russian-backed blockade of many Georgian servers (government institutions and news agencies, among others);
- disinformation and manipulation of the facts, e.g. in the comments on the decisions taken at the summit of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, whose partial and cautious support was presented in the Russian media as a great success for Moscow, while failing to mention the fact that SCO member states had chosen not to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia despite Russian efforts to the contrary. Russian media also manipulated the numbers of human casualties caused by the 'Georgian aggression'; figures for the number of civilians killed in South Ossetia were constantly changing, reaching as high as two thousand people, although this was not confirmed by other (non-Russian) sources;
- passing in silence over events inconvenient for Russia (e.g. real ethnic cleansing in South Ossetian villages inhabited by Georgians and mass looting committed there by Ossetians);

- biased selection of 'eyewitnesses'; finding Georgian civilians who criticised their government in front of TV cameras, denied that Russians had caused damage in Ossetia and Georgia and who called Russians "guarantors of peace and security";
- using the Internet in the information war, e.g. discussions on internet forums and circulating jokes about Georgia online, etc.

The propaganda message conveyed by the media consisted of the two elements, **propaganda 'for export' and that 'for domestic usage'**.

In the **message addressed to audience abroad**, Russia was trying to prove the thesis that its activities complied with international law and that the actions taken by Russia were in keeping with those of the West taken in the past (making reference, among other examples, to the case of Kosovo and the NATO bombardments of Yugoslavia in 1999). In doing so, Russian politicians and media representatives significantly **took over both Western terminology and media know-how**. Russian senior officials used such international legal terms as 'genocide,' 'ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia,' 'peace enforcement in Georgia' and 'humanitarian catastrophe in Ossetia.'

The 'Western' style of reporting on the operation was also copied; General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, spokesman for the Russian army, explained all aspects of the operation using maps and multimedia gadgets.

The propaganda front aimed at the West was created first of all by the English-language TV channel *Russia Today*. Foreign media were also used, when Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev gave a number of interviews to foreign TV broadcasters (including CNN, ARD, BBC, Al Jazeera, etc.). In fact, in the first days of the war, Russian TV was practically the only provider of 'pictures' from the conflict site (when the war broke out, dozens of Russian journalists 'ready' to give live reports on the war were in South Ossetia). Russian commentators later pointed out the Western media's 'lack of professionalism' claiming that they had borrowed Russian recordings of the damaged Tskhinvali and shown them as pictures of Gori destroyed by Russians.

For the domestic audience, Russian media created a unilateral and extremely emotional message, putting special **emphasis on humanitarian issues**. The pictures of human suffering and the heartlessness of the "Georgian aggressors", drawn with heavy lines, dominated news bulletins on Russian TV and in the press. A similar message was conveyed in official speeches given by state representatives. A typical opinion in this context was expressed by Sergey Mironov, speaker of the upper house of the Russian parliament, speaking on 25 August about Georgian activities, "People won't be able to live in one country with those who were burning alive, smashing with tanks and executing their families and friends, with those who drove them off their homeland, who deprived them of their homes and property, who were shooting our peacekeepers in the back and finishing off the wounded."

The entire campaign was characterised by an **unprecedented level of verbal aggression** addressed mainly against the Georgian president and his circle. The names by which Mikheil Saakashvili was branded in the Russian media ranged from unfavourable to unparliamentary (in the latter case, Mikhail Leontiev, the commentator for Channel 1 of Russian TV, led the way by using such words as "criminal", "lunatic Georgian *führer*, armed to the teeth by the USA," and "Georgian paranoiac who got a spanking;" there was also reference to "Saakashvili's inability to abstain from sexual activity not only among his subordinates but also in the presence of leaders of some countries bordering Georgia," etc.). Saakashvili was also compared to Hitler by Dmitry Medvedev, who

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warned the Western states against the tactic of “appeasing the aggressor”, which had more than once given pitiful effects and added, “I mean the Munich Agreement of 1938” (11 August). While giving reasons for the Russian military intervention in Georgian territory Medvedev stated, “Muggers who have sensed the smell of blood can usually only be stopped by surgical methods” (12 August).

The domestic success of the propaganda

While the Russian propaganda brought very modest success in the international arena, inside Russia **the public appeared to be very receptive to the message addressed by the authorities**. Anti-Georgian sentiments quickly increased in Russia (negative perception of both Georgian authorities and the Georgian nation) and negative attitudes towards the West, especially the USA, intensified. According to a VCIOM opinion poll carried out on 29 August, following the events in South Ossetia, 51% of Russian admitted that their attitude towards Georgians had worsened. In a VCIOM poll conducted on 14 August the public were asked who was to blame for the conflict. 54% of respondents indicated Georgia, 22% indicated the United States, and 12% believed that Georgia, Ossetia and Russia were equally guilty. 59% stated that Russia had an obligation to intervene immediately. In turn, 75% of respondents in a public opinion poll conducted by the *Obshchestvennoye Mneniye* foundation on 1 September supported the Russian government’s decision to send their troops to South Ossetia. A survey conducted by the Levada Centre on 21 August showed how anti-American sentiments had been growing: in December 2007 Russian-US relations were believed to be ‘cool’ (27%), ‘tense’ (14%) and ‘hostile’ (3%), while in August the numbers grew to 39, 28 and 8%, respectively. At the same time, 74% of respondents believed that Georgia and the Georgian nation were hostages to the United States’ geopolitical aspirations.

The anti-Georgian campaign has once again proved that the Russian public is highly receptive to state propaganda. As a consequence of many media campaigns of this kind, public sentiment in Russia follows the guidelines given by the state authorities. Campaigns waged by the Kremlin in the past against the Baltic states, Poland, the USA, etc. invariably caused a worsening perception of those countries among Russians. The Kremlin’s propaganda was even successful when it contradicted traditional likes and dislikes; following a temporary improvement of relations between Russia and the USA after 11 September 2001, Russian television started promoting a positive image of the USA, which quickly resulted in an improved perception of the USA in the traditionally anti-American Russian society. Russian society’s susceptibility to manipulation is first of all the result of **the lack of alternative sources of information**. Popular TV stations, which are used by the authorities as propaganda bullhorns, have no alternative in the form of equally popular but independent media. A curious Russian can find a different point of view only in a low-circulation newspaper or the Internet, while most of the society either have no access to alternative sources or are not interested in searching for different information. Thus the Kremlin’s control of the media is one of the key tools of its rule that contributes to the consolidation of society around the Kremlin and reinforces the power of the present ruling team.

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