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# Globalising Russia's Narrative of the Russo-Georgia War

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**Summary**

Since 2014 Western newspapers have devoted copious column inches to stories about Russian 'disinformation'. If Russia's claims about the annexation of Crimea and the downing of flight MH17 excited Western media hacks, then events surrounding the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency a couple of years later only heightened their interest.

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It fitted well with the narrative of a new Cold War, although many serious analysts rejected the analogy to the earlier era. Western media coverage often links Russia's contemporary use of information to Soviet-era propaganda or 'active measures', but it usually overlooks how the conduct of the Russo-Georgia war of 2008 may have influenced the current generation of the Russian leadership and its use of information as a weapon.

## Rival accounts of the war

Key aspects of Russia's narrative of that war have been internalised uncritically around the world. Russia argues that the war commenced on the night of 7-8 August when Georgian troops shelled the South Ossetian city of Tskhinvali and killed two Russian peacekeepers. Accordingly, Russia claims that its military action was reactive and stresses the indiscriminate nature of the attack on Tskhinvali where its peacekeepers operated with Georgia's consent. The Russian-side maintains that Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's order to shell Tskhinvali was rash – an argument that by and large persuaded both domestic and international audiences.

Georgian officials, in contrast, insisted that Russian troops invaded South Ossetia prior to the shelling of Tskhinvali. They emphasise the violation of Georgia's territorial integrity and its right to take measures to uphold its territorial integrity irrespective of its consent to the presence of peacekeepers. They challenged Russia's claims that it was protecting 'Russian citizens' since they knew full-well that Russia had implemented a policy of distributing passports – so-called 'passportisation' – in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the years before the war. A policy that Russia has also infamously used in Ukraine.

## Why Russia's narrative triumphed

> One reason for the success Russia found in fixing its version in people's minds was the (perhaps unwitting) role of other actors.

Germany's deputy foreign minister asserted that it was Georgia breaking international law and found reasonably wide support in the Bundestag. As the war drew to its end, French president Nicolas Sarkozy expressed understanding for Russia's questionable argument about defending its citizens (there are Russian citizens in most countries). Whichever side one blames, such prominent support for Russia's position from European politicians helped Russia's narrative to prevail. The European Union later commissioned a fact-finding report that acknowledged that the shelling of Tskhinvali was 'only the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents,' yet largely also bought Russia's fundamental argument that 'a large-scale Georgian military operation' marked the starting of the war. Georgian claims about earlier Russian incursions were deemed not 'sufficiently substantiated.'

> In fact, Russia's fundamental claims should have been interrogated more fully: Russia also mounted a large-scale military operation. The question of who started the war is far from clearly established.

Focusing on the date of Russia's invasion conveniently downplays the destruction of Georgian villages prior to Saakashvili's order and Russia's role in supporting South Ossetian forces prior to 7-8 August. Moreover, there is credible evidence that Russian troops crossed the border into South Ossetia via the Roki tunnel before Saakashvili issued his order, which Russia subsequently didn't deny but dismissed as the regular rotation of peacekeeping forces. Andrey Illarionov gives a comprehensive account

attributing blame in starting the war to Russia in a book chapter. Such arguments do not appear to have been given very much attention by Western policymakers in the period after the war.

The EU-commissioned report downplayed other relevant facts. Despite the long-simmering dispute over the two separatist republics, Russia recognised them as subjects of Georgian sovereignty through the CIS charter; Russia did not formally recognise South Ossetia as a subject in international relations. If one were to accept that the shelling of Tskhinvali was indiscriminate, it is not clear why this should be privileged over the patent violation of Georgia's sovereignty. Russia's large-scale invasion was a massively disproportionate response to the deaths of two peacekeepers and suggests considerable preparations. Indeed, Pavel Felgenhauer made a compelling argument that rather than being a spontaneous reaction to Saakashvili's actions, the 2008 invasion had been carefully planned over a period of several years.

The ceasefire negotiated between Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and French president Nicolas Sarkozy made significant concessions to Russia. One commentator lamented the possibility that the concession on the continued presence of Russian peacekeepers may have been granted simply because French negotiators weren't closely engaged with the situation on the ground. If this is true, the lack of awareness of European officials also helped the Russian version of events to triumph over the Georgian version.

## Russia's foreign-language media

> Also vital to the success of Russia's version was the role of its own international media.

*Russia Today* (later rebranded RT) broadcast Russia's case to English-language audiences via cable television. Although the Russian state cannot fund RT to the same extent some Western states can fund their own media, the investment into RT in the decade since the war has been considerable and, while reports suggest that RT's audience share remains small in most countries where it broadcasts, its message is amplified through its website and a strong social media presence.

Stations such as RT helped Russia test multiple lines of argument during and after the five-day war as it did later in Ukraine, or more recently still surrounding the poisoning of Sergey Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom. Russian officials boldly accused Georgia of genocide and repeated the argument that its military intervention protected Russian citizens. This latter argument may not have gained much traction

with international audiences at the time, though similar arguments found more success in Crimea where Russian officials claimed they supported ethnic Russians (an argument that could not be made in respect of the Ossetians whose ethnic descent is from the Alani, a Scythian tribe).

## Lessons from the war

Russia clearly learnt military lessons from its invasion of Georgia. While its troops quickly routed the Georgian forces, weaknesses in planning were exposed by the number of 'friendly fire' incidents and below-par equipment evident in the resistance Georgia could muster. Following the war Russia began reforms of its military by reorganising its structure and modernising its capabilities. The efficiency of the operation in Crimea surprised most observers and showed off the improved capabilities of Russia's special forces since the 2008 war. More generally, Russia's involvement in the wars in Ukraine and Syria has demonstrated the success of former defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov's reforms.

If Russia drew so many lessons about its fighting capabilities, then it seems reasonable to suppose that it learnt from the information war fought in 2008 as well. It is regrettable that the Western response to alleged Russian 'disinformation' has often been finger-pointing initiatives rather than the careful construction of winning arguments.

> Western media criticism of Russia would do well to admit that all states engage in some degree of propaganda.

At the same time, RT has emerged as part of a phalanx of global media that have gradually eroded the Western monopoly on reporting, a trend aided by the rise in use of social media and which will affect the wars to come and influence public support or opposition to them.

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