

# **The media coverage of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War**

## **And its impact on the conflict**

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### Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wars are not just about guns and artillery anymore because there is another kind of war that is a lot more insidious than the traditional one: the war of information. When a war is raging in an “important” part of the world (that is, one in which Western nations have interests), another war is raging, in the media. The 2008 Russo-Georgian war is a brilliant example of this, where Georgia fought for the support of the international community while Russia tried to stop it. Both countries used their best weapon: communication. It is then interesting to analyze the way this war was covered by the international media, to see how this new type of warfare had an impact on public opinion and foreign policy regarding both Russia and Georgia.

Further, it is important to highlight not only the importance of this war in the context of international relations and the impact it had on Georgia, but also the impact on Russia and on the West, especially when it comes to NATO’s expansion and the unity of the European Union.

This study consists of five parts: a short introduction, the story of how the conflict unfolded, a media analysis from both the Russian and the Western sides, a part related to the “CNN effect”, or to put it in other words, the impact that the media had on the war, and a conclusion.

### The 2008 War

The 2008 war lasted five days, from August the 7<sup>th</sup> to August the 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008. But in reality, this conflict had been brewing since the beginning of the 1990s. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia was one of the first countries to declare its independence, claiming both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of its territory, just as it was during Soviet times. However, these two regions have since declared independence, even though it has yet to be recognized by the international community.

The first bullet of the 2008 war can probably be traced back to the 1991-1992 war that took place in South Ossetia between Georgians and the South Ossetian ethnic minority, and to the 1992-1993 war that took place in Abkhazia between Georgians and the Abkhazian ethnic

minority. Both wars ended in cease-fires. From then to the summer of 2008, South Ossetia was monitored by the OSCE and a contingent of peacekeepers from Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia, and North Ossetia, while Abkhazia was monitored by the United Nations with the direct help of Russia. This implies that Russia retained a lot of influence in both regions. Already in 2002, Russia started a policy of passportization in both regions, handing out passports to most citizens living in these areas, giving Russia the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) its own citizens according to the Russian Constitution. This global political commitment was also endorsed by all the members of the United Nations in 2005, in order to prevent further genocides, ethnic cleansings and crimes against humanity in all parts of the world. However, the policy of passportization was declared illegal in the EU’s Tagliavani Report, published after the August 2008 war, thus making the invasion of Georgia to protect Russian citizens under the R2P also illegal.

The situation in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia became tense again after Mikheil Saakashvili was democratically elected president of Georgia after a peaceful revolution at the end of 2003. One of the main points in his program was the de facto reunification of the country. In the summer of 2004, gunshots and artillery fire were heard but the conflict was soon under control. From 2006 onwards, Saakashvili tried to use soft power to regain South Ossetia with more or less success depending on the area. In 2007, the Georgian government set up a Provisional Administration of South Ossetia, with Dmitri Sanakoyev as its head, in order to counter the regional South Ossetian government (which was not recognized by Tbilisi, and whose president at the time of the 2008 conflict was Eduard Kokoity).

Even though some risk of escalation in both regions had been seen as a possibility by many international relations experts, no one thought it could happen so fast and reach such a scale. But the beginning of 2008 brought up some important events that might have precipitated the conflict. Kosovo was recognized as independent on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008. This is very important because the then President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, had insisted for a long time on the fact that recognizing the independence of Kosovo would set a precedent for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Then, at the beginning of April of the same year, the NATO Summit was held in Bucharest. During this summit, Georgia (and Ukraine) asked to be granted the NATO MAP (Membership Action Plan), a plan that would help them reach the necessary requirements to become NATO members. The United States fully supported the idea of granting the MAP to Georgia because of the strong ties between the two countries. Indeed, the US saw Georgia as a beacon of democracy in the Caucasus and an example that other ex-Soviet republics around the Black Sea could follow if it was successful. Moreover, the United States welcomed the Georgian support in the war in Iraq. However, the European leaders were not sure whether or not it would be a good idea to allow Georgia to be part of the Membership Action Plan just yet: some leaders didn’t see Georgia as a democratic enough country to be part of NATO in the near future. This lack of unity between the NATO members was seen as a sign of weakness from Russia. Instead of being granted the MAP, both Georgia and Ukraine were given a written promise that they would become members of NATO in the future. But when that will be has been unclear from the beginning and can be seen as a compromise between Georgia and the US on one side and sceptics of Georgia’s democracy, such as Germany, on the other side.

In short, according to Ronald D. Asmus in his book, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (2010), there were three reasons for this war to start: the ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the recognized independence of Kosovo, and Georgia's aspirations to the West as opposed to Russia's more pan Slavic line of ideology since the millennium.

From February 2008, the tensions between Georgia and Russia were building, reaching a peak in July before calming down for a short period of time and then flaring back up the second week of August. In the weeks right before the war started, the Russian 58<sup>th</sup> Army conducted a major exercise, called "Kavkaz 2008", in North Ossetia, on the border with Georgia. The soldiers taking part in this military exercise were handed leaflets titled "Soldier, know your potential enemy", with information about the Georgian army (Svante E. CORNELL and Frederick STARR, 2009, pp. xii-xiii). After the end of the military exercise, most soldiers stayed in the region. Mikheil Saakashvili asked for help from the international community because he feared that Russia would invade Georgia. But the American administration told him not to use force against Russia under any circumstances and President Bush insisted that he would not come to rescue Georgia if Saakashvili decided to launch an attack. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, hostilities kicked off between South Ossetians and Georgians in the region. President Bush insisted again that Saakashvili shouldn't enter a war he could not win. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, Mikheil Saakashvili made a pledge of non-aggression on Georgian television. But that night, as reports of Georgian civilians and peacekeepers being killed kept coming in, he sent the Georgian army take back control of the capital city of the separatist province, Tskhinvali. This is of major importance because the Russians used it to place Mikheil Saakashvili as a liar who could not be trusted. The Georgian President, when giving his order to attack, insisted on protecting civilians and not attacking the Russian peacekeepers unless attacked first. Georgian reports show that Russian troops were already on Georgian soil before the war broke out the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, while Russian authorities deny it and claim that Russian troops came to help Russian civilians only from the afternoon of the 8<sup>th</sup> of August onwards. Russian journalists covered the very beginning of the war because about fifty of them had been sent to Tskhinvali a few days before the hostilities broke out. Furthermore, international journalists weren't allowed in the conflict zone, so they had to report from Georgia proper and rely on the Russian news where South Ossetia was concerned. Another problem that the Georgian government had to face was that even before the war started, the country had been the victim of a cyber-attack, complicating communication with the outside world. The cyber-attacks on Georgia, launched as early as July 20<sup>th</sup>, were perpetrated by the Russian Business Network (RBN), a network of Russian hackers. Whether they were working for someone else is still unclear (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/technology/13cyber.html>).

On August 10<sup>th</sup>, Russia opened a new front in Abkhazia. And from there, it launched an all-out war against Georgia, heading towards Tbilisi. From this moment on, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who then chaired the presidency of the European Union, made it his responsibility to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict before the fall of the regime in Georgia. The United States decided not to take the leading role in the negotiation process in order not to anger Russia even more and risk a new Cold War. By the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, Nicolas Sarkozy had negotiated a cease-fire with the then President of Russia, Dmitri Medvedev.

Mikheil Saakashvili agreed to it reluctantly because it didn't mention the territorial integrity of Georgia and some sentences weren't clear enough. This lack of clarity gave Russia extra time to keep their position inside Georgia proper before agreeing to withdraw its troops back to the position they had held before the war broke out. The Russian troops have still not withdrawn to that position they were holding before the war broke out nine years on, since they are still stationed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

## The media coverage analysis

### The Russian media

When it comes to the Russian media, I focused primarily on the news channel *Russia Today* because I had unrestricted access to their videos on *YouTube*, which wasn't the case for other channels such as *Perviy Kanal*. This is apparently due to the restricted access of Russian news in Georgia since the 2008 war. The problem with *YouTube* though, is that videos are not accessible in a chronological order, which made the analysis challenging but not impossible.

The arguments that are the most often used in the Russian media is that Russia went to war to protect its civilians in South Ossetia. According to the Russian Constitution, Russia has the "Responsibility to Protect" its citizens wherever they are in the world, giving Russia the right to invade a country. The fact that the citizens of South Ossetia were artificially made Russian citizens when handed Russian passports is of little importance to Russia.

Further, in the videos, the journalists, the then President of Russia Dmitri Medvedev, and the then Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin also used the argument of the Olympic Games to demonize Mikheil Saakashvili for launching the attack on the eve of the opening of the Games in Beijing. And it is interesting to note that Saakashvili used the same argument against Russia when giving televised press conferences.

Russian press also mentions the word "death" multiple times, whether it is related to the death of Russian peacekeepers in the region, or the death of women and children, though most of them had been evacuated to North Ossetia before the beginning of the war. It even mentioned that in the first 24 hours of the war, over 2,000 civilians were killed. But in fact, during the entire war, 162 civilians, 170 Georgian soldiers, and between 70 and 80 Russian soldiers (numbers from the Russian side keep fluctuating) were killed (Svante E. CORNELL and Frederick STARR, 2009, p. 178). But since the Western media had only access to the Russian news for information during the first days of the war, some of them relayed this information too, giving a terrible (and false) image of the Georgian army, deliberately killing its own civilians. Later, to justify the all-out war against Georgia, Russian news started mentioning "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" against South Ossetians, when in fact, reports show that the ethnic cleansing that happened was from South Ossetians towards Georgians living in the separatist province. They were chased out of their homes and their empty houses were then burnt to the ground to make sure that they would not come back.

Another argument that comes up often is the idea that Mikheil Saakashvili was helped by the United States and by the European Union in this war. This comes from the fact that the US was training Georgian troops for a mission in Iraq and to make them ready for their possible future NATO membership. However, the Russian authorities used this argument to “prove” that Georgia had increased its military potential by 30 times in the years prior to the war because it was “preparing” for the war against South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This is of course not the case, because had Georgia been prepared and had Georgia planned the attack, all their troops would have been on Georgian soil, including about 2,000 soldiers stationed in Iraq (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/11/georgia.russia8>). As for the European Union, I think this idea comes from the fact that every time Mikheil Saakashvili made speeches on television, he had the flag of the European Union behind him. However, this does not mean that he was helped (or even supported) by most the European leaders, but rather that he had strong aspirations for Georgia to become part of the European Union and he wanted the world to know about it. This however didn’t help his case, nor the Western case, in the war and in the negotiations that followed.

The way Russian propaganda works is very interesting because most of the time the basis of their information is correct, but is used out of context to recreate a story that has nothing to do with reality. It is easy to make people believe that the European Union has Mikheil Saakashvili’s back when he is always seen with the flag of the EU behind him during his public speeches. And it is easy to make people believe that the United States played a role in this conflict when American officers trained Georgian troops. The fact that it was for Iraq, and not for an attack on South Ossetia, suddenly disappears and a new story is given in its place.

The images used on Russian TV usually show the video segment of Georgians shelling Tskhinvali on the first night of the war. What makes this image powerful is that this happens in the middle of the night, and we can imagine the families sleeping peacefully while being shelled. What the Russian news does not say is that most of the women and children had been evacuated before the conflict broke out. They also show images of dead Georgian soldiers, to show the audience that the Russian army is doing its work properly. But the images that I think have the biggest impact are the images of South Ossetians thanking the Russian soldiers coming to their rescue. In my opinion, these video segments are the most effective because, according to Barbie Zelizer in her book *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (2010), near-death-images have the most impact because we can imagine what is going to happen to the people in the photographs. In the case of the civilians thanking soldiers, when we see the relief on their faces, we can imagine what happened and what they went through before the Russian army came to their “rescue”. Our imagining the events makes these images more powerful than what is actually depicted in them.

## The Western media

When it comes to the Western media, I focused most of my attention on the *New York Times*, and *Le Monde* because these are considered “quality papers” worldwide and I had access to their 2008 archives. I also thought it would be interesting to not only focus on the American news and include the French in order to avoid the basic Russian/American dichotomy and have another point of view on the conflict.

As mentioned above, during the first few days of the war, international journalists had no access to the conflict zone. This is why the American journalists relayed Russia’s (biased) information coming from Tskhinvali. For example, they mentioned the “at least 2,000 deaths” that we can find in the Russian media and it was not before August 12<sup>th</sup> that the newspaper evoked the possibility of false numbers coming from the Russian side. The French journalists of *Le Monde* however, didn’t mention any casualty numbers. I believe this is because they wanted to check all their information before printing, thus reporting the conflict in a more neutral way than *The New York Times*.

In the first days of the conflict, we can feel real anger against Saakashvili in the American press for starting the war, which is later quietened as more information from international journalists started coming in. Indeed, at the beginning, it wasn’t really clear who attacked who first. Nine years after the end of the conflict, the question who started the war is still not agreed upon by everyone.

The arguments of the Olympic Games, aforementioned on p. 7, is also used in American media to shame all parties for their actions in what is supposed to be a moment of peace and harmony in the world. Indeed, the Olympic Games are supposed to be a moment when all the countries in the world come together and enjoy the memorable and historic Olympic competition. Many world leaders asked Georgia and Russia to agree on a cease-fire during the Games, but it was never agreed upon.

Moreover, the cyber-attacks that I never saw mentioned in the Russian media are barely mentioned before August 11<sup>th</sup> by the *New York Times*. And these cyber-attacks were actually never mentioned by *Le Monde*.

Another big difference between the American and the French press is that the *New York Times* only mentioned Eduard Kokoity as the President of South Ossetia, while *Le Monde* also mentioned Dmitri Sanakoyev. This seems like a small difference of little interest, but I found it very important because it shows that *Le Monde*, though it has much fewer articles on the topic than the *New York Times*, was trying to be as neutral as possible in the conflict and everything related to it.

The journalists from the *New York Times* also mentioned the impact that this Georgian war had on the elections in the US. Indeed, the Republican candidate John McCain had strong and friendly ties in Georgia and had been campaigning against the presence of Russia in the Group of Eight for many years before the conflict even broke out. This is why, when the war started, his poll score went up, even above that of Obama for the first time since the beginning of the campaign. This argument was used by some Russian media to “prove” that the United

States had organized the war against Russia ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL1Sg5j6JHs&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DYL1Sg5j6JHs&has\\_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL1Sg5j6JHs&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DYL1Sg5j6JHs&has_verified=1)) and stood firm behind Saakashvili.

## The “CNN effect”

The “CNN effect” can be simplistically explained as the role the media plays in international relations. Even though it seems quite simple explained in this manner, it is actually a lot harder to observe and analyze, partly because of the huge number of definitions that exist. Indeed, some researchers, such as Steven Livingston, define it as the way the media can influence policy-making, while others see only see it in relation with humanitarian interventions. But most foreign policy actors agree that media has a role to play in international relations.

In the case of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, I think it would be more interesting to consider the “CNN effect” in the whole context of international relations, and not just when it comes to the humanitarian intervention, because it was primarily a military intervention. This is why I decided to use Livingston’s model to understand the impact of media on this conflict.

<b>Accelerant</b>	Media shortens decision-making response time. Television diplomacy evident. During time of war, live, global television offer potential security-intelligence risks. But media may also be a force multiplier, method of sending signals. Evident in most foreign policy issues to receive media attention.
<b>Impediment</b>	Two types: 1. Emotional, grisly coverage may undermine morale. Government attempts to sanitize war (emphasis on video game war), limit access to the battlefield. 2. Global, real-time media constitute a threat to operational security.
<b>Agenda Setting Agency</b>	Emotional, compelling coverage of atrocities or humanitarian crises reorder foreign policy priorities. Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti said to be examples.

This table is a summary of Livingston’s model. He divided the impact of media on foreign policy into three categories: the “CNN effect” can be an accelerant of decision-making, it can become an impediment, or it can set the agenda.

### *Accelerant*

In this case, the information is arriving too fast for the policy-makers to really think because they have to find a solution as soon as possible. Further, in the communication world we now live in, there is a tendency to have what we call “tele-diplomacy,” that is diplomatic meetings that are filmed and broadcasted, which makes the entire process more transparent. However, sharing information can create security issues in some cases.

### *Impediment*

There are two types of impediment when it comes to the “CNN effect”. The first is an emotional impediment and the best example for it is the Vietnam War. Indeed, the images and news coverage coming from Vietnam caused huge discontentment in the US and undermined the morale of the troops on the field. The Vietnam War was a turning point in the way the American media covered wars in which they were involved.

The second type of impediment is related more to security because revealing some information could put the national security or the lives of soldiers and civilians at risk. Yet security is not the only important thing playing a role in this type of impediment. Indeed, in the

summer of 2007, Gela Bezhushvili, the then Georgian Foreign Minister, and Sergey Lavrov, met in Istanbul to discuss a plan that could solve the issue of South Ossetia. The Georgian government was willing to accept a special regime in South Ossetia, as well as economic advantages and energy developments. It was suggested to hold monitored elections to give all South Ossetian leaders a chance to compete for office and a plan was drawn to solve the border issue. And on top of this, Georgia gave Russia a chance to have their say in the international affairs of South Ossetia. But the plan backfired when newspapers published the content of their conversation, supposedly monitored and leaked by the FSB (Ronald D. ASMUS, 2010, pp. 83-84). There was no security threat in the making of this treaty. It was quite the opposite actually: calming old tensions and desires for revenge. But when the plan was leaked, Lavrov was as upset as Bezhushvili about it. So why did it backfire? Perhaps the FSB was interested in undermining the efforts made by Lavrov and Bezhushvili.

### *Agenda setting*

In this case, emotional coverage of atrocities has a huge impact on public opinion, which then turns towards the policy-makers to do something about the situation and intervene, either in humanitarian ways or militarily.

### *The case of South Ossetia*

The case of South Ossetia is interesting because we can find all three effects in the way the media impacted the conflict. If we analyze it in chronological order, the first impact we can find is the impediment, with the FSB leaking secret information to newspapers and backfiring Bezhushvili and Lavrov's diplomatic advances toward a long-lasting peace.

We can find the agenda setting effect in the way Russia got involved in the war to "avoid ethnic cleansing and the genocide of South Ossetia, and the barbaric killings of Russian citizens". The media used powerful images and words to show their approval of Dmitri Medvedev's decision to enter the war. And this had a huge impact on public opinion, which, in its majority, supported the government's decision to enter South Ossetia and then go all-out on Georgia.

And finally, we can find both emotional impediment and the accelerant effect at the same time, but in different regions of the world. The emotional impediment happened in Georgia. Indeed, at the time, some of the most-watched news channels in Georgia were Russian ones. And the Russian coverage of the war had a terrible impact for Saakashvili and for the morale of the Georgian people and soldiers. But in the meantime, the accelerant effect was kicking in throughout the Western world. While Georgia was just an ex-Soviet republic that wanted to be part of NATO, no European leaders really cared about it. But suddenly, it became the center of all discussions and worries. The territorial integrity of Georgia had never been seen as an urgent problem before the war broke out, and suddenly, South Ossetia (and to a lesser extent Abkhazia) were the most pressing issues of the moment. In five days, the European Union (under the presidency of France and its President Nicolas Sarkozy) managed to get a cease-fire agreement with Russia. And it took a little longer to get Mikheil Saakashvili to agree to it as it was concluded swiftly and many things were left unclear, and it didn't mention the territorial integrity of Georgia. The reason behind the swift drafting was that the media was showing how bad the situation was or exaggerating it when it came to the Russian news.



However, it is important to mention that the “CNN effect” has a stronger impact when there is a higher policy uncertainty, but a lesser impact when there is more policy certainty, according to Piers Robinson (2000, p. 615). This is one of the reasons why the United States, NATO, and the European Union did not intervene militarily. They had been very clear before the conflict broke out that they would not intervene and they did not do so because their policy was clear and certain. Additionally, none of the actors wanted to risk a military confrontation with Russia. This is why, even though the United States and the European Union sent humanitarian aid after the conflict ended, they did not impose any sanctions on Russia during the conflict, only doing so (imposing short-term economic sanctions) in the aftermath.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to highlight the consequences that this five-day-war had on the world, and on Georgia in particular, as well as on the relations between Russia and the West. None of the parties can really be declared winner in this conflict because they all lost to some extent. The most obvious one is Georgia, which lost all control of the separatist territories, and was greatly weakened militarily speaking. It also lost hopes to become part of NATO in the near future, and we can see today, nine years after the war, that things haven't really changed on that account.

As for Russia, even though it was barely sanctioned by the international community, it scared a number of potential investors away and still lost a lot of its global political prestige. Indeed, the international community has finally understood that Russia is ready for military intervention if its interests are at stake. It previously gave a 19<sup>th</sup> century image of itself, ready to protect its sphere of interest, though this had been unrealistic since the end of the Cold War thanks to the different treaties signed since between Russia, and Western countries and organizations. Russia became once more the neighbor that we can never really trust, making its relations with the West more complicated.

But the West is also a loser in this war. It lacked unity from the beginning and Russia decided to test it. And it failed the test because it hadn't been able to answer appropriately and bring the support that Georgia needed to avoid a conflict with Russia. It recognized the independence of Kosovo, not taking into account the possible consequences for Georgia, and ignoring Putin's warnings. Then it failed to provide Georgia with the NATO MAP, which might (or might not) have been enough to avoid the conflict. And if not, then it would have given some insurance and support to Georgia anyway. The West imposed economic sanctions on Russia that were short-lived and did not affect Russia in any way. The European Union feared that Russia would sever gas delivery via Ukraine to the EU member states since some European countries are very dependent on Russia for their gas and electricity.

Finally, a question that we could all ask ourselves is whether or not each party learnt its lessons and to what extent. A good case study to answer this question would be the current crisis between Russia and the West in Ukraine. And again, it would be interesting to analyze

the media coverage dedicated to that crisis because it merited a lot more attention than Georgia in the European Union, since this conflict happened right on its doorstep. This time, however, the EU stakes in solving the conflict are bigger than in Georgia and this necessitated EU unity and steadfastness in dealing with Russia. The EU unity and steadfastness proved to be the biggest surprise for Putin's Russia which counted on the opposite, as happened in Georgia before.

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