

# Russo-Georgian war of 2008 in the Spotlight of the New York Times and the Washington Post

Tsitsino Bukia and Nana Parinos

**Abstract**—Reporting conflicts has become a new challenge for twenty first century media. Journalists are required not only to provide objective and impartial information to the audience, but also to conduct proper analysis and, most importantly, adhere to the most basic rule of doing their job.

In this case, objectivity and impartiality are necessary, but at the same time, a lot of work needs to be done for a proper analysis. In general, all events, especially in politics, are interconnected. Surprisingly, what is happening in the smallest country can make impact on the political life even of such a superpower as the USA. Consequently, no wonder that flagships of the American print media: *The Washington Post* and *New-York Times* were interested in the reporting of the August 2008 Georgian-Russian War.

The August war between Russia and Georgia, of course, also fell under the lens of Georgian and Russian media. Their attitude is easy to guess, although it should be noted that during this period Georgian media were freer expressing their views, while the Russian side was clearly influenced by the authoritarian regime.

The purpose of our research was to present the 2008 Georgian-Russian conflict in the spotlight of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*

Post and identify the trends reported by the US press about the event.

In our research we used content analysis method. The subject of the study was the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* August 5-12.

**Index Terms**—American Press, Russia, Georgia, war of 2008, USA.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are many conflict hotspots in the 21st century world map. Disagreements between countries cause instability in the region, which, in turn, negatively affects political processes. In this situation, the role of the media is very important. In addition, to providing the world with news, primary responsibility of the media is an impartial assessment of events. The ability to shape public opinion accumulates great power in media's hands.

Conflicts and confrontations are usually better covered by foreign journalists. This happens of having no emotional involvement and bias, and so the processes seem to be better. As for the media of the countries that are involved in the conflict that are directly or indirectly related to the conflict, they often have to carry out their duties on an emotional basis or in accordance with the requirements of the authorities. Consequently, some balanced information and analysis cannot be disseminated by them.

“The journalists from the *New York Times* also mentioned

the impact that Georgian war had on the elections in the US. Indeed, a 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. That is why 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 and stood firm behind Saakashvili“[1]

To maintain influence in the region, Russia has done everything. It provoked conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The escalation of these conflicts harmed all parties and even complicated their resolution. American colleagues used the rhetoric of Russian media to illustrate that an authoritarian theory of the press still exists in Russia. The American media indirectly stated this through their freedom of speech and critical statements.

According to media reports most importantly, the August five-day war did not benefit either side. Neither side has won this conflict, especially Georgia, which lost the chance to join NATO in the near future [1].

The August war between Russia and Georgia, of course, also fell under the lens of Georgian and Russian media. Their attitude is easy to guess, although it should be noted that during this period the Georgian media were freer expressing their views, while the Russian side was clearly influenced by the authoritarian regime.

The Russian media is completely controlled by the government and propagate its views. [2] The press is much freer, although it is limited in its capabilities and is under pressure from local officials in the regions. [2] The purpose of our study was to present the 2008 Georgian-Russian conflict in the spotlight of the “*New York Times*” and the “*Washington Post*” and identify trends reported by the US press about the event.

Our studies used qualitative research methods, a content analysis method. The subject of the study was the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* August 5-12.

## II. “NEW YORK TIMES”

An article “Bush Sending Aid to Georgia” had been published in “*New York Times*” under the rubric “World”, by *David Stout* (reported from Washington), and *C. J. Chivers* (from Tbilisi, Georgia), in August 13, 2008. Material tells us about Georgian-Russian crisis. Text is informational and it is describing what was happening in Georgia at that time and how America decided to help the democratically elected government of Georgia. “President Bush said Wednesday that the Pentagon had begun a “vigorous and ongoing” humanitarian mission to ease the suffering in Georgia, and that Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice would travel to France and then to Georgia to work for a settlement of the crisis, \_ had been reported in an article” [3]

One important circumstance to note is that it was emphasized by journalists – the Bush administration, while supportive of Georgia, but was limited only to humanitarian aid. However, as the journalists had noted, President of Georgia interpreted this assistance differently.

“However, minutes after Mr. Bush’s comments, President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia characterized the import of the American aid as “definitely an American military presence” and called it a “turning point“.

The article summarizes the essence of the issue and in the text formed by the two correspondents, no trace of analysis can be seen. It is limited to providing information and leaves open questions. The concluding part of the material more raises issues than shows to author’s opinion. It is as if the journalists either do not want to go into the depths, or do not care about the topic in more detail than it was presented.

Ending of the media text that way causes the reader to feel wandering. It raises questions about the causes of the crisis and the development of the scenario in the region. It seems that text has no aim to bring more clarity to the issue. And leaves the feeling, as the text was not finished.

Another article had published in same theme, in “*New York Times*” (10, 2008) was “Taunting the bear” by *James Traub*, he had called Hostilities between Russia and Georgia “almost absurdly over-determined”. Journalist had painted a picture of the actual situation in the region, saying that Russia, according to Saakashvili, is harassing Georgia and Ukraine, violating Georgia’s territorial integrity. These countries, in his words, aspire to NATO membership, while Prime Minister Putin explained that Russia would never agree on a NATO existence in the Caucasus [4].

The reporter evaluated situation as Russia has a huge military advantage. Georgia is an open, more or less democratic nation with a free market, which considers itself as a distant outpost of Europe and has a determined rhetorical and political advantage [4].

By the reporter’s opinion Georgians are melodramatic people, and little more powerful than their hyperactive president; but they have good reason to fear the ambition and anger of a renewed Russia looking for regain lost power. Indeed, a resurgent and increasingly belligerent Russia is an ominous sight for the West as well [4].

As we can see, the journalist freely had expressed his views about both sides and had emphasized the characteristics of both countries, pointing to the real danger in the region.

The author also notes that But the Bush administration also admits that Russia has absolutely legitimate security interests and that Saakashvili is playing a risky game of intimidating Russians [4].

The reporter had tried to maintain a neutral position and to "understand" the interests of both countries, but in this case he had more a role of an observer and had not try to determine which side is right. The author also says that as a result of his observations, while talking to several people in Tbilisi, he had become convinced that Russia was associate with the enemy for Georgian people.

The journalist had proposed readers of a brief historical excursion and had told them how this small country has gone through a difficult time before independence. “The roots of this bitter relationship are deep and tangled, as is practically everything in the archaic world of the Caucasus. Modern Georgian history is a record of submission to superior Russian power. Threatened by the expanding Persian Empire, in 1783 the Georgians formally accepted the protection of Russia; this polite fiction ended when Russia annexed Georgia in 1801. The chaos of the Russian Revolution finally gave Georgia a chance to restore its sovereignty a century later. The Georgians were Mensheviks — social democrats, in effect — and for three years enjoyed one of the world’s most progressive governments” [4].

The analyst believed that the biggest problem for Russia was Georgia’s aspiration for NATO, and it will use all its leverage against it. The journalist was only limited to describing the situation, explaining the reasons, but said nothing about the solution. About what will prevent the conflict, or what might solve the problem of a democratic post-Soviet country. If we rely on the reporter’s analysis, it turns out that Georgia will have this problem permanently, as Russia with its gas and oil resources will always be able to control Europe without giving up its ambitions.

Reporter raised theme about the separatist aspirations of those living in the conflict zone. According to the journalist, the Saakashvili authorities also tried to change the situation through negotiations, but the plan failed in early 2006.

According to the reporter, he was in Sokhumi and it was more expected to resume hostilities there than in South Ossetia. The journalist tried to find the historical basis of the conflict in the material, which is clearly written in the following words: “The Abkhaz talk about the Georgians pretty much the same way that the Georgians talk about the Russians. On that point, the Abkhaz share much with the South Ossetians. For them, as for the Ossetians, Georgia is the neighborhood bully”. It would be right to speak with a specialist in the field of history. In that case the information the reporter would have been received would be more relevant. It seems that author spoke with Abkhazians and Georgians, but we don’t know the respondents names who told him about the history. Such actions seems no reasonable.

The final part of the article makes the reader think that the existence of some causal links between events makes the situation clear. According to the journalist, the oppressed Georgia itself is an oppressor of Abkhazia and Ossetia: “Georgia’s predicament seems very simple from the vantage point of Tbilisi — 1921, 1938 — but extremely complicated from a great remove. Russia threatens Georgia, but Georgia threatens Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia looks like a crocodile to Georgia, but Georgia looks to Russia like the cats’ paw of the West. One party has all the hard power it could want, the other all the soft. And now, while the world was looking elsewhere, the frozen conflict between them has thawed and cracked. It will take a great deal of care and attention even to put things back to where they were before.”[4]. A version of this article appears in print on August 10, 2008, in *The International Herald Tribune*, which was reprinted by *the New York Times*. In this case, there are two possible assumptions: Either he totally agrees

with the reporter's opinion and republishing other's material, or it does not consider the issue worth paying attention and giving the job to his own correspondent for preparing the exclusive material.

Anyway, the article is full of contradictory opinions that serve only partially to establish the truth. It informs a reader of the topic of interest in the conflict zone while at the same time trying to present reasons, but neither first nor last says anything about the expected solutions.

Thereafter, this analysis was written by a reporter of another newspaper who was responded to the event, but did not do deep research. In "The York Times" in August 11, 2008 was published an article by C. J. Chivers: *In Georgia and Russia, a perfect brew for a blowup*. A version of this article appears in print on August 11, 2008 at *The International Herald Tribune*. This fact gives us the opportunity to think that "the New York Times" was not very interested in the events taking place in Georgia, or cared about other problems. The basis of this statement is the fact that "the New York Times" used another newspaper's material to analyze the events in the region.

According to the journalist, the US, with its experience in Iraq, has also pushed Georgia to engage into the conflict, with Russia successfully were establishing positions in Chechnya. The Kremlin has distributed Russian passports to Abkhazians and Ossetians, offering the protection of its citizens as a basis for invasion. Saakashvili established positions in Adjara and recaptured Kodori, US assisted Georgia in armaments and training. The conflict would have been escalated in any case, as Russia had no desire to negotiate.

The material thus tells us what has prompted the parties to resume this conflict. Saakashvili's charisma could have been used to bolster US support and thus provoke Russia's annoyance. It is to be assumed that the protection of anonymity of the source and the excessive caution are due to these circumstances.

Either way, the "New York Times" has responded indirectly (with other newspaper's articles) to the conflict. That's way he even expressed his own attitude, which can be formed by these words - I see, though I do not discuss in depth invade.

### III. "WASHINGTON POST"

Russian Air, Ground Forces Strike Georgia (By Peter Finn Washington Post Foreign Service Saturday, August 9, 2008) tells about the beginning of military action, civilians are dying and the US and Europe are calling on the parties to cease fire. The author then explains to the reader when the conflicts in Ossetia and Abkhazia began.

"The Bush administration offered strongly worded backing for Georgia but avoided any mention of possible military assistance"[5].

The author gives to their readers detailed information about the negotiations. At the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympian games Bush met Putin. The statements in support of Georgia's territorial integrity were made by the White House Spokeswomen Dana Perino, Condoleezza Rice and Senators: Barack Obama and John McCain.

According to the journalist, Georgia tried to start the

negotiation process, but Russia put the situation in a deadlock. The publication is a detailed report, with journalists trying to show the positions of all parties. All sources are public and the information is verified. The material is mostly informative, but there are also some analytical spots highlighted by the evaluative suggestions.

„For South Ossetians, Bitterness Follows Attacks“, publication By Peter Finn published in "Washington Post" (Sunday, August 17, 2008) tells us about the damage brought by the renewed conflict.

The reporter describes in detail the situation in the Autonomous Republic of South Ossetia after the ceasefire - damage to buildings and people's view. "Here in Tskhinvali, there was no doubt that Georgia started the war with Russia and much bitterness about the rain of artillery and rockets that the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili used in its efforts to capture the city. The Georgian government said much of the destruction of Tskhinvali was caused by a Russian counteroffensive, but that argument carries no weight with residents here, some of them clearly traumatized." [6].

The author concludes and shows the Ossetians attitude towards Georgians: "Georgian officials accused the Russian peacekeeping force of backing the South Ossetian separatists and failing to rein in their attacks on Georgian villages and territory in Georgia proper." [6].

Russo-Georgia War Intensifies (Staff writers Karen DeYoung in Washington, Tara Bahrapour in Tbilisi and Colum Lynch in New York contributed to this report) by Peter Finn Sunday (August 10, 2008) It tells of the destruction of houses and economic objects by Russian bombers. The text shows that Russia is a side in this conflict:

Rhetoric on both sides escalated Saturday, with each side saying it wants peace and a cease-fire but with neither showing signs of backing down. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin accused Georgia of "genocide." Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, speaking to a small group of foreign reporters, vowed that Georgia will "resist until the end." Alexander Stubb, the Finnish foreign minister and chairman of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said: "Russia is at the moment a party in this conflict." [6].

As we can see, the material contains specific messages that the reader should pay attention to. Importantly, however, the author does not do the analysis himself. It offers the reader the material for analysis.

Article "Georgia Retreats, Pleads for Truce; U.S. Condemns Russian Onslaught", By Peter Finn ("Washington Post" Foreign Service, Monday, August 11, 2008) tells as a story how the Russians bombed the conflict zone on August 10 and also dropped a bomb on the territory of a military factory in Tbilisi. Material contains really well-defined information.

It seems the reporter has decided to check the official position. As Georgian government had claiming the Georgian side wants to stop the war, but as Journalist said the polls showed the opposite. "Civilians told the reporters that Georgian tanks had fired indiscriminately during the two-day seizure of the city, killing and wounding many city residents." [6].

The article notes that Medvedev accused the Georgian

side of genocide in Ossetia, while Foreign Minister Lavrov denied that the bomb had been dropped in Tbilisi. The reporter claims that Russia, where public television is targeting Georgia, does not even cover Russian military intervention in Georgia.

Reporter suggests that although Medvedev is officially Russian president and the supreme commander, it seems Putin to be performing this function, and he does not like Saakashvili, who aspires to Georgia's NATO membership.

According to the journalist's analysis, Russia seems to be opposed to aggression. However, this article is loaded with information, each highlighting Russia's active involvement in the conflict.

The material written by *Michael Dobbs* (August 17, 2008) tells that recent events in Georgia have reminded many of Hitler, and he believes that "They are better understood against the backdrop of the complicated ethnic politics of the Caucasus, a part of the world where historical grudges run deep and oppressed can become oppressors in the bat of an eye" [5].

According to the journalist, Ossetians perceive Georgians in the same way as Georgians perceive Russians, referring to the following quote: "We are much more worried by Georgian imperialism than Russian imperialism," an Ossetian leader, Gerasim Khugaev, told me then. "It is closer to us, and we feel its pressure all the time." [5].

The analyst notes the signs of autocracy behind Saakashvili's democracy; he believes that Georgian democracy is closely linked to nationalism.

Journalist accuses Saakashvili of provoking war: "While this may well be the case, the Georgian response was disproportionate. On the night of Aug. 7 and into Aug. 8, Saakashvili ordered an artillery barrage against Tskhinvali and sent an armored column to occupy the town. He apparently hoped that Western support would protect Georgia from major Russian retaliation, even though Russian "peacekeepers" were almost certainly killed or wounded in the Georgian assault [5]. According to the analyst, it would be better for the United States to be careful in supporting NATO membership. Saakashvili's ambitions were to receive help from America in the war. But that did not happen.

Thus, analyzing a specific article, we can conclude that the author urges America to maintain a neutral and moderate position.

The Georgian side made many mistakes in this conflict, but Russia also feels owner in the post-Soviet space.

In this confrontation, the author concludes that America must maintain a neutral, conciliatory position.

The analysis goes deeper into historical depths and emphasizes the guilt and interests of the parties. It's clear see the conflicting parties as enemies in each other.

Consequently, the conclusion that the author makes for America it's better to be an observer.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on our analysis of two prominent representatives of the American print media, the "New York Times" and the "Washington Post" we can conclude that:

- "The New York Times" drew some attention to the Russian-Georgian military confrontation in August

2008, when several publications on this subject were published;

- An articles in "New York Times" in that period were mostly informative and limited to describing the situation;
- We cannot said that the "New York Times's" interest for reporting this conflict was a special, because it used an articles of "The International Herald Tribune" for that period. This could only happen because of two things: the "New York Times" either fully agreed with the "International Herald Tribune", or the specific issues did not seem so significant, that at that particular moment the correspondent was sent to the region;
- An analysis of the materials of the "New York Times" shows that correspondents are only trying to determine the causes of the conflict, although they do not say anything about the possible development of events and no solution is offered by them;
- "The Washington Post" devoted much more time and space to covering the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 than the New York Times;
- "The Washington Post" did not use materials other media to cover a specific conflict, but rather sends its correspondents to the region;
- Articles of "The Washington Post" about a specific topic are loaded with information and not only informed the reader, but also offered historical insights to better understand the situation;
- "The Washington Post" emphasized the mistakes made by Russia and Georgia, which, in his opinion, led both sides to a military clash;
- When analyzing materials of a certain period and topic published in the Washington Post, it becomes clear that the author of the article often does not conduct the analysis on his own, but rather collects information to provide the reader with material for analysis;
- The Washington Post position on this conflict is unambiguously read when analyzing published materials from that period. The publication strongly expresses its position and believes that America should not interfere in the conflict and be limited to the function of an observation.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest".

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Tsitsino Bukia and Nana Parinos conducted the research. Tsitsino Bukia and Nana Parinos analyzed the data. Both wrote the paper. All authors had approved the final version.

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