

Presidential Web sites and the Georgian-Russian War, 8-16 August 2008

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Abstract

During the war between Georgia and Russia, 8–16 August 2008, the Web sites of Presidents Mikheil Saakashvili and Dmitry Medvedev were used actively to promote their countries' conflicting views on the war. This article considers the structure of the two Web sites, their use during the war and their place in the media systems of Georgia and Russia.

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1. Introduction

On 8 August 2008, after years of confrontational politics and recriminations between Georgia and its breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgian troops advanced into South Ossetia in an attempt to reassert Georgian sovereignty. The ensuing fighting quickly spread to Abkhazia. Russia sent in reinforcements to its local 'peacekeeping' forces maintained since the early 1990s in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and invaded Georgia proper. Russian military might soon prevailed, and on 12 August Russian troops had advanced almost to the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

To assess these events, we should recall that in September 1990, South Ossetia had seceded from Georgia to seek reunion with North Ossetia inside the crumbling U.S.S.R. Half a year later, in April 1991, Georgia itself and other Soviet republics had declared their independence from the U.S.S.R., which collapsed in December 1991. In 1992, Abkhazia seceded from Georgia, provoking a war 1991–92 that Georgia lost, followed by an exodus of Georgians from Abkhazia (Cooley, 2008; Cornell, 2008; George and Stefes, 2008).

During the August 2008 war, the Web sites of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili were saturated with patriotic, multimedia cyber rhetoric (text, sound and image) while Russian and Georgian media demonized the other as the real aggressor. Pro–Russia Web sites launched cyberattacks against Georgian Web sites, including the British and U.S. embassies in Tbilisi.

StopGeorgia, a Russian Web site, provided target lists of Georgian Web sites, which subsequently became congested with bogus e–mail requests. Although the extent of the Russian state's involvement remains unclear, and although the attacks on Georgian targets caused little harm compared with Russian cyberattacks on Estonia in 2007, it is suggestive that cyberwarfare has become a NATO priority (*Economist*, 2008).

Global news media gave a more impartial view of the war, while French President Nicolas Sarkozy, at the time also titular head of the E.U., tried to negotiate a settlement. On 16 August, Russia and Georgia signed a peace treaty, brokered by Sarkozy. When Russia on 26 August formally recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, only Nicaragua followed suit, and the conflict lingers on in a simmering deadlock.

Several Western analysts have interpreted the Georgian–Russian War, 8–16 August as a modern geopolitical resurgence of traditional Tsarist imperialism in the Caucasus, going back to Tsarist Russia's annexation of Georgia in 1801. In this view, Russia is seen to have given a lesson to the pro–American Georgian leadership wanting membership in the E.U. and NATO.

Russia is also seen to have retaliated against Western recognition of Kosovo in the Balkans. Not least, Russia is seen to have reacted against Western attempts to bypass Russia in the Caucasus, its traditional sphere of influence, by constructing oil and gas pipelines from Baku through Georgia to Turkey and Europe. This challenges Russian energy supplies to Western Europe (Shevtsova, 2007; Cooley, 2008; Cornell, 2008; George and Stefes, 2008; Sakwa, 2008).

In February 2009, six months after the war, Russian military commentators predicted that a new war was imminent, that once the melting snows in the Caucasian mountain passes allowed tanks to pass through, the Russians would again invade Georgia, this time to topple Saakashvili and have him replaced by a less hostile successor, in the mold of Eduard Shevernadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, who had been ousted by Saakashvili's "Rose Revolution" in 2003. In April 2009, opposition forces in Georgia staged mass demonstrations in Tbilisi against President Saakashvili, accusing him of having started a reckless and costly war.

In May 2009, Georgian authorities had to put down a reported military mutiny in Georgia against a joint NATO exercise in the country. In late June and early July 2009, just before U.S. President Obama's first visit to Russia, a major Russian military exercise unfolded in the Northern Caucasus. The visit to South Ossetia of President Medvedev on 12 July 2009 was condemned by Georgia. One week later, U.S. Vice-President Joseph Biden arrived in Tbilisi, reiterating and demonstrating U.S. support to Georgia and to Georgian territorial integrity. The conflict remains unresolved, threatening stability in the Caucasus and beyond (Vaagan, 2009).

2. Presidential Web sites

With the rise of the Internet, the use of new media by politicians, such as Web sites, blogs, or social networks such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, thereby extending the public sphere into cyberspace, has begun to attract scholarly attention, including post-Communist countries (Luke, 2006; Chadwick, 2006; Jakubowicz, 2007; Dadas, 2008; Vartanova and Smirnov, 2009).

Since around 2000, the Internet has been used extensively for U.S. Presidential campaigns (Hara and Jo, 2007; Hara, 2008) and the success of Barack Obama's Presidential campaign 2007–2008 where the Internet played a vital role, will reinforce this trend. Although some research claims that digital democracy is myth because most traffic involves only a small elite (Hindman, 2009), Presidential Web sites are potentially important as "agenda setters" of public opinion (McCombs, 2004) and "primary definers" of news events [1], especially in the authoritarian political systems we find in Russia and Georgia.

This does not mean that audiences cannot be critical and skeptical to government-controlled media outlets. Still, little research has so far been done on the role of Presidential Web sites. They are not mentioned in studies on comparative media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), barely referred to in more recent anthologies on political communication (Margolis and Resnick, in Negrine and Stanyer, 2007), ignored in the discussion on "Propaganda and the Internet" in Jowett and O'Donnell [2] and also absent in recent primers on globalization and world politics (McPhail, 2006; Lechner and Boli, 2008; Baylis, *et al.*, 2008). In post-Communist countries such as Russia and Georgia, practically no research has been done on them (Jakubowicz, 2009; Vartanova, *et al.*, 2009).

All this is surprising. As titular heads of state, presidents in many political systems are constitutionally invested with ultimate political power. This is the case in both Russia and Georgia. In the case of Russia, articles 80–93 of the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation give the Russian President sweeping powers in domestic and foreign affairs, including the armed forces. (There is discussion about the power relationship between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, who also maintains a Web site).

Similarly, articles 69–77 of the 1995 Georgian Constitution (last amended in 2006) also give the President supreme authority in domestic and foreign policy, including the armed forces (Constitution Finder, 2009).

To explain this lack of research, we need to acknowledge that Presidential Web sites are far from being primary sources for investigative journalists and the media. These have become increasingly sensitive about source-driven journalism, spin and manipulation in Western democracies by the PR industry and government (Pilger, 2005; Hobsbawm, 2006; Stuart, 2006; Meikle, 2009).

Projected to post-Soviet authoritarian systems like Russia and Georgia, there seems to be all the more reason to suspect spin and propaganda by ruling elites. This is why most investigative journalists view government and Presidential Web sites as channels of one-way information and vehicles of propaganda and spin.

As a rule there is no serious attempt at feedback or interactivity, *e.g.*, by including blogs or social networks. Yet this may be changing. At least the effort invested in maintaining these Web sites suggest their Webmasters see them as important channels of information and persuasion.

Reinforced by advanced search and archival functions, and taking advances in online journalism into consideration (Campbell, 2004; Allan, 2006; Meikle, 2009), as well as the possibility of two-way dialogue, these Web sites are not only authoritative information sources and digital repositories, but also potential dialogic channels, where more research is needed.

Internet usage in Russia and Georgia, although still limited, is increasing and forms an important part of the media scene in both countries, especially in Russia. By March 2009, Internet penetration was 27 percent in Russia and 7.8 percent in Georgia (World Internet Usage Statistics, 2009). According to Koltseva (1998), Russian authorities learnt a lesson losing the information war during the first Chechen War 1994–96, and subsequently used the media more actively, including the Internet.

Today, while television dominates the information sphere (Mickiewicz, 2008), the Internet as a source of information has become the runner-up [3]. In January 2000, coinciding with the ascent of Vladimir Putin as Acting President, the Web site of the Russian President was launched (President of Russia, 2009).

In Georgia, the "Rose Revolution" of 2003 brought the U.S.-trained lawyer and former Minister

of Justice Mikheil Saakashvili to power. He was elected President in January 2004 by an overwhelming majority. A cornerstone of Saakashvili's policy has been to restore Georgia's territorial integrity by regaining the irredentist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia which had both proclaimed independence from Georgia in 1990 (Karumidze and Wertsch, 2005).

In 2005, the Web site of the President of Georgia was launched. Today, television remains the main source of news in Georgia. The state has relinquished control of many media outlets but retains control state TV and radio through Georgian Public Broadcasting. There are many cable operators and commercial stations (BBC, 2009).

The starting pages of the Presidential Web sites of Presidents Medvedev and Saakashvili (English–language versions) appear as in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) below.

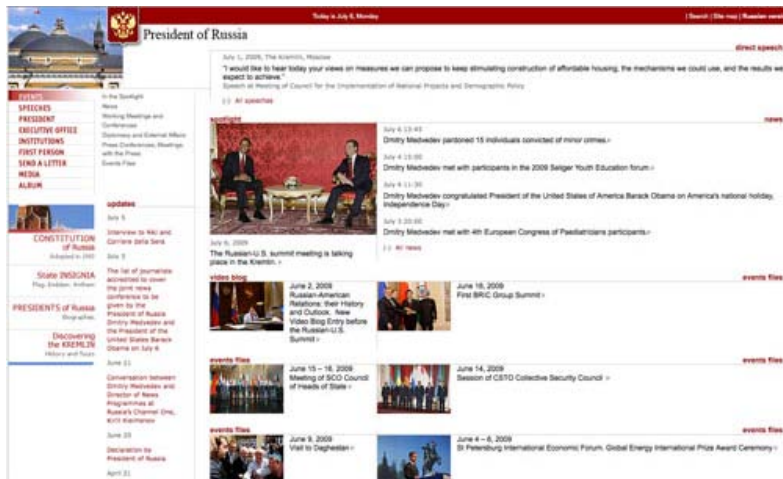


Figure 1: President Dmitry Medvedev's Web site (English–language version) at <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/>, accessed 6 July 2009.

President Medvedev's Web site is bilingual (Russian–English) and designed in three columns. The site map shows a three–tier structure with 18 main terms, 63 second–tier terms and seven third–tier terms. The Web site contains several multimedia features with video footage, and soundtrack speeches, national anthem pictorial guided tour of the Kremlin, etc.

At the top left we find the roofs of the Kremlin with the (small) Russian flag placed beside the traditional Russian head of state insignia, the double–headed eagle and the title of the President of Russia. At the bottom no Web manager is identified, (although the domain name is the Kremlin) but a choice of four alternatives "about the site", "subscription", "news feeds" and "WAP". The first choice lets us know the site was started in January 2000, in a much simpler version. There is no visible counter of visitors.

The relative insignificance placed on the Russian tricolor flag is in marked contrast with that of President Saakashvili's Web site's prominent display of the Georgian flag. This may be because the lineage of the Russian tricolor is unclear, and it only became official in 1896. It was replaced by the red Soviet flag 1917–1991, when it was restored by the Russian Federation. In the top right corner we find the sitemap and search engine.

The search engine provides advanced search possibilities, also by date. The term "Georgia" generated around 601 hits (there was no counter) in advanced search mode on 9 July 2009, including President Medvedev's "Statement on the situation in South Ossetia" discussed further below. The far left column offers a choice of "Events", "Speeches", "President", "Executive office", "Institutions", "First person", "Send a letter", "Media", "Album". These are followed by "Constitution of Russia, adopted in 1993", "State insignia", "Presidents of Russia (biographies)", "Discovering the Kremlin". The second column from the left contains the choices "In the spotlight", "News", "Working meetings and conferences", "Diplomacy and external affairs", "Press conferences, meetings with the press", "Events files". Below these we find chronologically arranged "Announcements" and "Updates" with brief hypertext.

The broad right column is broken down into two columns, and contains from the top "Direct speeches", then extensions (photos and text) of "In the spotlight", then "Video blogs", "Events files" and "Issues". As for interactivity, two–way communication is technically possible through the option "send a letter". But little is known about this feature and its use. Also, in the video blog, there is not option to comment.

President Saakashvili's Web site is also bilingual (Georgian–English), designed with three columns and has some multimedia features with video footage. The site map shows a two–tier structure with nine main terms and 43 second–tier terms.



Figure 2: President Mikheil Saakashvili's Web site (English-language version), at <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E>, accessed 6 July 2009.

At the conspicuous top left corner we find the Georgian flag covering the two narrow left columns, and beside this topping the broad right column the title "President of Georgia" set against a palace background with the presidential/royal insignia of two lions holding a shield with St. Gregory and the dragon.

At the bottom, the Web site manager is listed as "The Communications Office of The President of Georgia", and is copyrighted since 2005. Also added is the designer, the commercial company www.pixel.ge. The prominence given to the Georgian flag is significant. The five-cross flag is an elaboration of the single red St. George's cross, patron saint of Georgia (and England), and can be traced back to medieval Georgian history, thus giving it particular significance for Georgian nationalists.

Although the Georgian parliament and the Georgian Orthodox Church supported the restoration of the flag, this was resisted by President Shevernadze. It was therefore appropriated by the United National Movement headed by Saakashvili as a sign of resistance to Shevernadze's rule, and has become a rallying point for Georgian nationalism.

In the top right corner we find the site map, and a link to the Georgian-language version. There is no archive option apparent although the site map in the top right corner offers access to archived material, and, as noted, an advanced search option. Nor is there any visible counter of visitors. In the search engine (advanced search), the term "Russia" generated around 410 hits (there was no counter), on 9 July 2009, including President Saakashvili's "Declaration of Universal Mobilization" discussed below.

The far left column lists a selection of searchable organization themes: "Main", "President", "First Lady", "Administration", "Press service", "Councils", "Government", "State symbols", "Useful information". (The last choice contains selected news items about Georgia in foreign media). Below follow further thematic choices linked to specific political issues: "Russian aggression", "Video material — Russia's aviation bombarding Georgian territory", "Georgia Update", "Diversity.ge", "Inter-Agency Task Force on Free and Fair Elections", "Letters to the President", "News Subscription", "Georgia's Democratic Transformation", "Constitution of Georgia", "Rose Revolution", "Georgia and the EU", "Rose Revolution Monument", "Revitalized Sighnaghi".

The second column from the left contains a searchable list with "Main topic", "Releases", "Briefings", "Speeches", "Visits", "Initiatives", "Annual Report", "Interviews", "Declarations and messages". In addition, there is an advanced search engine and a sitemap with a date for the last update. The broad right column lists chronologically a selection of arranged news items, with photos, that are printable. Regarding two-way communication, there is the option "Letters to the President", although little is known about the use of this option.

The two Web sites thus have many similarities in terms of form, content and functionality, including the option to send a letter directly to the head of state. The differences include the following:

- kremlin.ru has a five-year longer track record than president.gov.ge
- kremlin.ru has a more complex structure than president.gov.ge
- kremlin.ru has more hits on "Georgia" than president.gov.ge has on "Russia"
- president.gov.ge displays more prominently the national flag than kremlin.ru
- president.gov.ge — but not kremlin.ru — displays the war on its start page
- president.gov.ge — but not kremlin.ru — has a start page link to the First Lady
- president.gov.ge uses some patriotic Georgian terminology for place names

- president.gov.ge lists a private commercial company as Webmaster

As for the Presidential spouses, Georgia's First Lady, the Dutch-born Sandra Saakashvili-Roelofs and her Russian counterpart, Svetlana Medvedeva, both maintain active profiles in domestic affairs, although only the former enjoys a separate link on her husband's Web site.

3. Usage of Web sites

Usage frequency and patterns can be linked with cognitivist framing on the receiver side, they indicate the activity and preferences of users, which in turn influence sender framing.

According to Alexa (2009), traffic rank over the last three months show that the Web site of Russian President Medvedev is much higher ranked (24,673) and thus far more popular than that of President Saakashvili (1,356,429).

The quarterly updated number of sites linking in, which is a measure of reputation, confirms that Medvedev's Web site (1,697) is more reputable than that of Saakashvili (141). Visitors over the last three months have spent 3,1 minute per day on kremlin.ru compared to 2,1 minutes per day on president.gov.ge. Finally, 85 percent of the visitors to Medvedev's Web site were Russian. Unfortunately, we do not have comparable figures for Saakashvili's Web site.

But what was the situation before, during and after the 8–16 August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia? Let us consider the period from mid–2007 until mid–2009 and look at the three parameters daily traffic rank trend, bounce rate and time on site. The methodology has been developed by Alexa (2009).

The daily traffic rank trend is a combined measure of page views and users (reach). The most popular site scores 1. In [Figure 3.1](#) we see that the ranking achieved by kremlin.ru improved from around 55,000 in mid–2007 to approximately 15,000 in mid–2009.

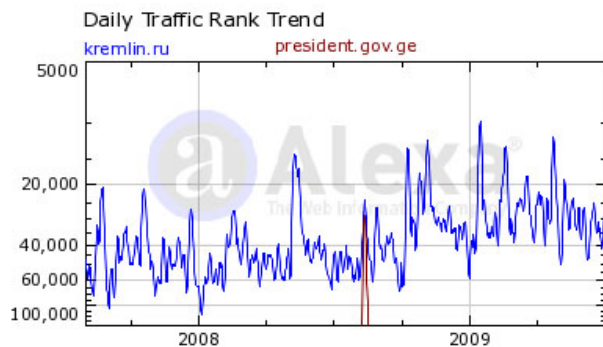


Figure 3.1: Daily traffic rank trend mid–2007 to mid–2009 (Alexa, 2009).

During the 8–16 August 2008 war the site ranked around 25,000, which was not very high compared with other peaks. By comparison, no ranking above 100,000 of president.gov.ge was registered, except at the time of the war 8–16 August 2008 when it soared to 30,000. In terms of daily traffic rank, the Web site of the Georgian President in particular seems to have played an important role during the war period.

The bounce rate in [Figure 3.2](#) below measures the percentage of visits that consist of a single page turn. Generally, a descending curve over time is positive, suggesting that fewer visits only turn a page and instead access online material such as archived documents, photos and footage. An increasing curve is correspondingly negative, indicating that an increasing number of visits only watch the starting page.

The average for kremlin.ru has hovered between 20–40 percent from mid–2007, and went above 40 percent from around April 2009. By comparison, the site president.gov.ge has moved from 80 percent in mid–2007 to zero percent in December 2008, suggesting that an increasing number of visitors access site material.

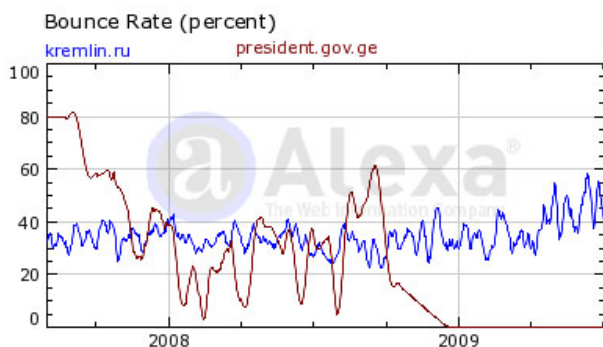
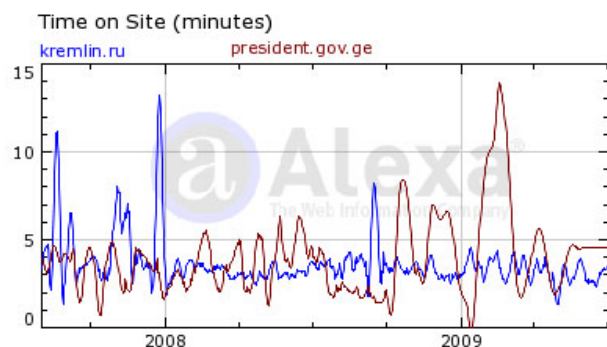


Figure 3.2: Bounce rate mid-2007 to mid-2009 (Alexa, 2009).

Time on site in [Figure 3.3](#) below measures how long viewers spent on the respective Web sites. The assumption is that the more time they spend, the more interesting they find it. On average, from mid-2007 until mid-2009, visitors to kremlin.ru spent around three–four minutes, with some notable tops around July and December 2007. At the time of the 8–16 August 2008 War, time spent increased to around seven minutes although we cannot conclude that this was due only to the war.

**Figure 3.3:** Time on site mid-2007 to mid-2009 (Alexa, 2009).

The president.gov.ge curve fluctuates more and moves between 1–6.5 minutes, leaps to eight minutes around September 2008 and experiences a top in February 2009 when anti-Saakashvili riots were under way in Tbilisi. At the time of the 8–16 August War, visitors were spending about four minutes on kremlin.ru compared with only two minutes on president.gov.ge.

4. Cyber rhetoric

Above, reference was made to patriotic multimedia cyber rhetoric (text, images and sound). To exemplify the text-based version, two policy statements published 8 August, the day the war started, have been accessed through the Presidential Web sites:

- President Mikheil Saakashvili's "Declaration of Universal Mobilization"
- President Dmitry Medvedev's "Statement on the situation in South Ossetia"

The two texts included below reflect the evocative phraseology that I elsewhere have analyzed in more detail in terms of framing theory (Vaagan, 2009).

President Saakashvili's statement draws on emotional language and it appeals to patriotic sentiment against the Russian aggressor. This is consistent with the visual features on the Web site starting page noted above. While it admits that Georgia initiated hostilities, these are seen as justified actions by Georgian "law enforcing agencies" against "separatist rebels" to "liberate" South Ossetia. His call for universal mobilization is directed to 'dear fellow citizens' but some paragraphs are addressed to the international community and the Russian Federation, and he also refers to Georgians abroad.

Other evocative and emotional terms include "separatist regime", "military aggression", "classic international aggression", "Russian bombardment of 'peaceful Georgian towns'", "Georgia was not the aggressor", "hijack our future and our liberty", "their bombs, their attacks, their aggression", "defending our country, our home", "defending Georgia's future", "we are a freedom-loving people", as well as the collective patriotic "we". The statement ends with a resounding "Long live Georgia, and may God save her and all of us".



08 August 2008 / 12:20



Declaration of Universal Mobilization by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili

My dear fellow citizens,

I would like to brief you about the events that took place last night.

As you all know, we initiated military operations after separatist rebels in South Ossetia bombed Tamarasheni and other villages under our control. Most of the territory of South Ossetia has been liberated and is now under the control of Georgian law enforcement agencies.

Last night, Georgian law enforcement agencies liberated the Tsinagra region, the Znauri region, the village of Dmenisi (one of the biggest village in the region), Gormi, and Xetagurovo. They also have surrounded Tskhinvali, most of which has been liberated. As I speak, fighting is taking place in the city center.

The fighting was initiated by the separatist regime. Aircraft entered Georgian airspace from the territory of the Russian Federation and the attack was carried out from the North.

I also would like to address the international community.

A large-scale military aggression is taking place against Georgia. Over the past few minutes and hours, Russia has been bombing our territory and our urban areas. This can only be described as a classic international aggression.

I would like to address the Russian Federation.

Cease your bombardment of peaceful Georgian towns immediately.

Georgia did not seek confrontation, Georgia was not the aggressor, and Georgia will not give up its territories. Georgia will not renounce its freedom and sovereignty.

We have mobilized tens of thousands of reserve officers, and the mobilization process continues.

We all have to unite in this very important and difficult moment for our homeland, when our future and our freedom are under threat-when others are trying to hijack our future and our liberty. We all have to unite. We should not be afraid. We should not be afraid of their bombs, of their attacks, of their aggression-we are stronger than that.

This is our homeland. We are defending our country, our home, Georgia-and we are defending Georgia's future.

We must unite. All of us, hundreds of thousands of Georgians here and abroad, should come together, unite, and fight to save Georgia. We are a freedom-loving people, and if our nation is united, no aggressor will be able to harm it.

We will not give up, and we will achieve victory. I call on everyone to mobilize. I declare, here and now, a universal mobilization of the nation and the Republic of Georgia. I hereby announce that reserve officers are called up-everyone must come to mobilization centres and fight to save our country.

We will prevail, because we are fighting for our homeland, our Georgia. If we stand together, there is no force that can defeat Georgia, defeat freedom, defeat a nation striving for freedom-no matter how many planes, tanks, and missiles they use against us.

Long live Georgia, and may God save her and all of us.

*Press Office
of the President of Georgia*

Figure 4: President Saakashvili's "Declaration of Universal Mobilization", dated 8 August 2008, at <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=0&sm=3&st=10&id=2689>, accessed 9 July 2009.

By comparison, Medvedev's statement is briefer and less rambling. It is addressed to "you" which can be Russians, Georgians and the international community. The emphasis is on the "absolutely lawful basis" of Russian presence on "Georgian territory" with peacekeeping forces. The peacekeeping mission of Russia is stressed, and it is claimed that Russia has been and is "a guarantor for the security of the peoples of the Caucasus".

Georgia's initiation of hostilities is marked, and this is described as a "gross violation of international law". Otherwise, the loss of Russian lives, both "peacekeepers and civilians, women, children and old people", is stressed. The statement appeals to logic in noting the duty of the Russian President to intervene when the lives of Russian citizens are at stake, "wherever they may be". The Saakashvili regime is incriminated as "perpetrators" who will be deservedly punished.



August 8, 2008, The Kremlin, Moscow. Statement on the Situation in South Ossetia

PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA DMITRY MEDVEDEV: As you know, Russia has maintained and continues to maintain a presence on Georgian territory on an absolutely lawful basis, carrying out its peacekeeping mission in accordance with the agreements concluded. We have always considered maintaining the peace to be our paramount task. Russia has historically been a guarantor for the security of the peoples of the Caucasus, and this remains true today.

Last night, Georgian troops committed what amounts to an act of aggression against Russian peacekeepers and the civilian population in South Ossetia. What took place is a gross violation of international law and of the mandates that the international community gave Russia as a partner in the peace process.

Georgia's acts have caused loss of life, including among Russian peacekeepers. The situation reached the point where Georgian peacekeepers opened fire on the Russian peacekeepers with whom they are supposed to work together to carry out their mission of maintaining peace in this region. Civilians, women, children and old people, are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation.

In accordance with the Constitution and the federal laws, as President of the Russian Federation it is my duty to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be.

It is these circumstances that dictate the steps we will take now. We will not allow the deaths of our fellow citizens to go unpunished. The perpetrators will receive the punishment they deserve.

Figure 5: President Medvedev's "Statement on the situation in South Ossetia", at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/08/081553_type82912type82913_205032.shtml, accessed 9 July 2009.

5. The media systems of Georgia and Russia

The role and impact of the two Presidential Web sites in terms of the national media systems of Georgia and Russia is a little-explored area. Comparative media studies so far have tended to concentrate on mainstream media and not include new media such as government websites (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Newer media research will, however, need to take these media channels into account.

In Russia, media usage patterns have changed dramatically since the Bolshevik propaganda outlets of Soviet Russia of the 1920s and the Soviet Union till 1991 (Oates, 2005; Vaagan, 2009). Since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, the dominance of the print newspaper has been replaced by television. From 2002 onwards, less diversity in television news has been a noticeable trend (Mickiewicz, 2008). In 2007, Russia had 1,100 television channels (five major networks and three nationwide channels), 670 radio stations and 53,000 periodicals.

The Internet has become a major source of information, and by March 2009, 38 million Russians (27 percent of the population) had access to the Internet. Therefore, a Presidential Web site is a logical development in Russia. Apart from *Novaya gazeta* where Anna Politkovskaya worked until she was assassinated in 2006, there remain very few independent media outlets critical of the government. The major five print newspapers and magazines in terms of circulation (*Rossiiskaya gazeta*, *Izvestiya*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenty i fakty*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*) are all owned, controlled or close to the government.

Television is by far the most popular media outlets for most Russians. The main TV channels — *Channel One*, *Russian television*, *TV-Center* and *NTV* as well as *Ren-TV* — are all firmly under Kremlin control [4]. In their annual report for 2008, Reporters Without Borders noted that the Presidential election in March 2008 was marked by "much pressure exerted on the independent media, with journalists arrested on the edge of opposition demonstrations, independent newspapers shut down and some journalists were forcibly sent to psychiatric hospitals — all bad omens". Furthermore, judicial enquiries into the assassination of Anna Politkovskaya and other celebrities gave no results [5].

The development of a Presidential Web site is a logical consequence of increased Internet penetration and media usage change. It is also a reenactment of Soviet propaganda traditions

into cyberspace (Vaagan, 2000). In authoritarian political systems like Russia with hardly any independent media left, the head of state exerts undeniable control on all or most media outlets, setting the agenda and playing the role of primary definer of news values. But this does not automatically translate into winning the attention, hearts and minds of audiences.

In Georgia, television is currently also the main source of information. But here there are many cable TV operators and commercial stations. Contrary to developments in Russia, the Georgian state has relinquished ownership in newspapers and a news agency but remains in control of the government-funded public broadcaster Georgian Public Broadcasting. The main TV outlets include *Georgian Public TV* which operates two networks, and the three private networks *Rustavi-2*, *Imedi TV* and *Mze TV*.

As for radio, *Georgian Public Radio* operates two networks alongside the private radio stations *Radio Imedi*, *Fortuna FM* and the NGO-driven *Mtsvane Talgha (Green Wave)*. Major print dailies are all private and include the former government mouthpiece *Sakartvelos Respublika*, *24 Saati*, *Rezonansi*, as well as the English-language daily *Georgian Messenger* and the two weeklies *Georgia Today* and *Georgian Times* (BBC, 2009). Only 7.8 percent (380,000 people) of the Georgian population of 4.4 million people enjoy Internet access (World Internet Usage Statistics, 2009).


Reporters Without Borders, in their annual report for 2008, noted that prior to the Presidential election in January 2008, the government in November 2007 had temporarily shut down all news programs on independent TV stations. This included *Imedi*, the most popular of the three privately-owned TV stations, with two-thirds of the national audience and run by opposition figure Badri Patarkatsishvili. In this situation only the state-controlled *Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB)* was allowed to broadcast news [6].

Against this background one may stipulate that the Presidential Web site introduced in 2005 by President Saakashvili plays an important role for his regime — much more so than that of Medvedev in Russia — as an adjunct to what is left of state-controlled media.

6. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the Web sites of Presidents Saakashvili and Medvedev played an active part during the Georgian–Russian War, 8–16 August 2008. Their creators used them as part of the war effort, with multimedia features of text, sound and imagery. In comparative terms, the Web site of President Shaakashvili is probably more important to his regime than that of President Medvedev in Russia.

As we have seen, this can be attributed to particularities of the Georgian and Russian media systems. Little is known about impact and audience reaction, or the extent to which the websites were used as sources during the War. Yet we can assume that the cyber rhetoric discussed here was meant to set agendas, define news values and form public opinion.

To develop this research, a promising avenue of investigation would be to conduct interviews with editors, journalists and audiences to study the shaping of public opinion. Another possibility would be to do source and content analysis to examine the extent to which the Presidential Web sites were quoted by other media. Finally, more refined usage statistics would be welcome. 

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Notes

1. Meikle, 2009, pp. 94–98.
2. Jowett and O'Donnell, 2007, pp. 152–157.
3. Vartanova and Smirnov, 2009, p. 140.
4. Sakwa, 2008, p. 348; Mickiewicz, 2008, p. 27.
5. Reporters Without Borders, 2009, pp. 131–132.
6. Reporters Without Borders, 2009, p. 124.

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