

# Johnson's Law and Media Bias in the Russo-Georgian War of 2008

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While researching an article on Burma, this author had a stunning realization: such countries are so obscure, so alien to the American experience, these writers can say whatever they want. They can make up the most lurid details to sell papers – so to speak – since there is absolutely no way to verify or deny them. Even if that occurred, most Americans wouldn't care. That was the first formulation of what this writer modestly termed “Johnson's Law.” The law has three main components:

1. The more obscure the region, the easier it is for reporters and analysis to make errors. It is not their daily fare and hence, it is easy for myths and stereotypes to rule.
2. The more obscure the region, the less real interest a journalist will have. This means they will be very easy to manipulate by intelligence agencies or the state. Journalist will only stand on principle on issues they care about.
3. The more obscure the region, the fewer are the people capable of refuting errors and therefore, journalists have little incentive to be careful with facts.

This paper will argue that media coverage during the month of August 2008 is best grasped relative to the audience. Major media in the west were, as usual, generally biased against Russia. Outside of (some) Russian media outlets, Russia was quickly and effortlessly painted as the “aggressor.” The Western audience is quite different than the Georgian or Russian. This is the case both in terms of the overall packaging of the message and the desired effect.

Part of the problem is the lack of public knowledge in the West. Westerners know little about either Russia or Georgia. The Georgian state hired the Public Relations giant Aspect Consulting, and they were able to help “guide” the media bias in the West, that, as several empirical studies have suggested, was overwhelmingly in their favor. The Kosovo Albanians did the same, suggesting that Johnson's Law also applies to the use of PR firms given the obscurity of the country.

Within the Russo-Georgian conflict, several variables suggest themselves. In the West, knowledge of Russia and (especially) Georgia is non-existent. This image of the “aggressive” Russian bear and the tiny “freedom-loving” Georgian had the goal of altering policy against Russian interest (Kaptelinin, 2012). The simple concept here is that the media can “get away” with more in obscure areas than well-known ones.

Georgians for a long time were very pro-Russian. The population still are. Thus, papers like the Georgian daily *Messenger* tried to remake the image of Russians in the eyes of Georgians. This requires that old stereotypes be removed (because they were positive) and then, as a result of reporting, be replaced with negative views and images. Johnson's Law most certainly does not apply to Georgia or Russia because they are well known to each other.

Relations between Russia and Georgia, even in the Soviet era, have been good. Target

audiences outside of eastern Europe are incapable of any action relative to this short war. Elites, not electors, declare war and carry it out. Given the size difference between the two states, it is very easy to paint Russia as the aggressor.

The Cold War bred a certain distrust of things Russian in the West. Georgia is almost totally unknown outside of the old Soviet Bloc, so creating images here is easy. Media can do whatever they please, at least in the West. Most importantly, several media outlets, even in the East, began to change their pro-Georgian stance by the end of August. Georgia's bad behavior quickly made them lose their moral high ground. However, today, those facts are long forgotten.

Previous images might, but do not have to, influence subsequent images. It is significant that, for the *Washington Post*, for example, few references to the very pro-Russian Ossetian population appeared in its editorials. If that were to be included, then the anti-Russian stance of the Post would have to be moderated. The fact that there were thousands of Russian nationals in the general area of the war too, is significant. All of these are Markovian sequences because it is impossible to tell how these variables, all quite different, will affect a) how reporting is done, and b) how readers will react, regardless of their ethnic background. To control for the Markov effect, outlets like the Post did not report, at least early in August of 2008, facts that might show sympathy to the Russian side (Dawson, 1973: 63-65).

The *Washington Post*, extremely biased against Russia (see the two editorials below) depicts the events of 2008 with an interest, presumably, to influence policy. Senator John McCain, as always, demanded military action against Russia, Syria and Belarus<sup>1</sup> all at the same time in 2008. McCain takes a huge amount of money from western energy companies, the main source of anti-Russian sentiment.

In the exhaustive empirical work of Heinrich and Tanaev (2009), a total of 371 articles were analysed from all media giants including *The New York Times*, *Handelsblatt* (the major German business paper), *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post* and several other American and European giants. In addition, the baseline narrative was policy speeches from both the Russian and Georgian side, as well as important local papers known to be loyal to their respective presidents.

First of all, the results dealt with the rhetoric of both presidents in 2008. Using different arguments made by both presidents rationalizing the war (such as aggression, invective, values or international law), the Georgian president utilized a tone of aggression about 13% of the time, while Medvedev, only 4%. Medvedev mostly used peace and security rhetoric as the main issue (making up about 51% of his speeches), while the same was used by President Saakashvili about 41% of the time.

When newspapers were analyzed, a 20 point scale (from -10 to 10) was used. Negative numbers represented a pro-Russian orientation, while positives, pro-Georgian. Thus, zero would mean pure neutrality. Of course the *Georgian Messenger* scored 5.2, the highest, while the Russian *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* scored -8.2. These are unsurprising. In the West, the *Washington Post* scored 3.2, *New York Times* 1, and *Handelsblatt*, 3.5.

Relative to opinion pieces, the same list of outlets scored, relative to balance (with 0 being totally fair, and 10 being so biased that the article was unreadable): 1.4, 0.8, 4.3, 4.2 and

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1 McCain's call for war against Russia and all of her allies is a daily affair. Knowing little about the country, McCain's Senatorial and Presidential candidacies have been financed by major energy firms competing with Russia. Yglesias (2008) is just one story, where McCain threatens a new Cold War over Russian missile shield development. Of course, McCain demands the US continue its own. He is typical of the "neo-Conservative" movement in the US and has little support in the UK.

3.6. This is intriguing because it shows that western media outlets were very unfair with opinions, but less so in reporting. The fairest of all was the Russian paper, followed by the Georgian one. This may suggest that both Georgian and Russian papers were interested in stressing the much older brotherly relations between the two related peoples rather than causes of conflict. It might also indicate that bias in reporting is more insidious than bias in opinion pieces. In terms of basic Sensitivity Theory, the reader has his guard up in editorials, but down in what purports to be “objective reporting.”

One can see the *Georgian Messenger* turning on their president in September of 2008, while the *New York Times*, went from being neutral by the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, to excitedly pro-Georgian by the 12-15<sup>th</sup>, to being critical of Georgia by the end of the month, after the 19<sup>th</sup>.

If we were to use any Markov Flow theory, it will fail as a tool for research. Markov flows deal with images becoming self-perpetuating. Remarks from the *Washington Post* include:

1. “The threat to Georgia, Russia’s other democratic neighbors and America ultimately arises from a lack of democracy within Russia” (Sharansky, 14 Sept. 2008).
2. “We view the events as confirmation of the dangerous challenge posed by an authoritarian regime unwilling to recognize the sovereignty of its former imperial possessions” (16 Aug. 2008).
3. “The West spent a good part of the past 17 years worrying about Russia's dignity – expanding the Group of Seven industrial nations to the G-8, for example – and it's not clear such therapy had any effect” (17 Aug. 2008).
4. Russia's invasion of Georgia was a highly organized assault that now appears to have been planned for months” (19 Aug. 2008, all quoted from Heinrich and Tanaev (2009).

The concept of Russia as “aggressor” is easy to paint, and yet, no one denies that Georgia received brand new western weapons just before the war began. The overheated rhetoric of the *Post* might have created a whiplash effect (especially given its liberal audience). Hence, identity issues are not operative, just political ones. Russians and Georgians know each other well.

In a *Guardian* editorial in August of 2008, J. Poulos cites several comments from major news organizations. From Slate, A. Appelbaum wrote that Russia will make “our” concern over “Islamic terrorism” as “the least of our problems.” The *Post* wrote this in an unsigned editorial delicately called “Stopping Russia”:

The principles at stake, including sovereignty and territorial integrity, apply well beyond the Caucasus. To abandon Georgia and its fragile democratic Rose Revolution would send a terrible signal to other former Soviet and Warsaw Pact republics that to Moscow's dismay have achieved or are working toward democracy and fully independent foreign policies (*Post*, 2008).

This is clearly conscious activity with a specific goal: defamation. Several days later, on 18 August, another editorial from the *Post* scorned Medvedev's claim that the Georgians committed war crimes. They even cited Human Rights Watch, that, a short time later, said that the Russian claim was basically true (see below).

After the war, in October of 2008, the BBC aired a segment on “Georgian War Crimes,” showing deliberate targeting of private homes by Georgian forces. While it admits that Russian

claims about the damage were exaggerated, it was only a slight exaggeration. Human Rights Watch also accepted that perspective, though they have been regularly hostile against Putin's Russia in the past (RFE, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

In a 2009 editorial in *Russia Today*, Peter Lavelle writes, "I am a media-watcher fanatic. I read everything I can find on what interests me most. And I won't surprise anyone when I write that I have relished witnessing western mainstream media climb down the humiliating ladder as it distances itself from Saakashvili's Georgia" (Lavelle, November 2009). Shockingly, the former CIA outlet, now owned by George Soros, *Radio Free Europe*, ran the headline "US Says Georgia Erred in August Attack in South Ossetia" (cited in Lavelle). This is after several months of anti-Russian rhetoric from Soros.

In 2009, an editorial from *Russia Today* stated:

When Russian soldiers captured US military personnel during the short war in South Ossetia, it was all over the Russian news and even in some US news. However, Washington was quick to deny the alleged charges of training and equipping the Georgian army and actually providing direct military combat assistance (Sansanov, 2009).

Since this was undeniable, some opinion turned against Georgia. She no longer could be depicted as helpless. Technically, the editorial goes on to say, the US could deny arming Georgia, because it was private military firms in the pay of Washington that did the arming. Israel was also heavily involved. It became clear very quickly that Georgia was being used as a proxy by western powers and was not a "beacon for freedom" has had been assumed.

The editor in chief of *Russia Today* is Armenian, not Russian, Margarita Simonyan. Due to pervasive media bias against Russia in the West during August of 2008, the editor stated:

Right now there are basically a couple of big agencies that provide the majority of news footage to international outlets, and particularly to TV channels and online platforms that cannot afford bureaus or send correspondents to every hotspot. As a result, viewers often see events around the globe through the eyes of these providers. In such a market there are inevitable gaps in coverage, plus the risk of bias in the eventual reportage (RT, 2013)

In the *Atlantic Review* (Aug 19 2008), Jorge Wolf writes that while media were undoubtedly biased against Russia in August of 2008, Georgia was not held blameless. Yet, what occurred was a shift in rhetoric. The flow was pro-Georgia, but when the facts came trickling in, the counterflow was unavoidable. It was moderated, however, by using euphemisms rather than harsh grandiosity.

In the Jamestown Foundation's book on oil pipelines affecting Georgia, the Georgian author states in the introduction: "The Russian invasion of Georgia established new strategic realities in Eastern Europe and Central Eurasia." This is stated as a matter of fact, requiring no argument (Tsereteli, 2009). The western media today admits their myth-making. Of course, now, no one is listening. On the other hand, papers in the West can also merely assert their former arguments as fact. Few, after the shooting stopped, cared enough to correct them. It is, of course,

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2 This could also be because since the war was no longer front page news, it was "safe" to admit the mythology.

different in the East.

### **Conclusions**

For those in the USA and the UK, Russia is known primarily as a Cold War adversary. Generally, only specialists have any detailed idea of what came before or what came after. Russia is not as mysterious as Churchill suggested, only that her topography, history and influences made her quite different from others. Speaking in very general terms, there is little doubt that the reputation of Russia in the West is generally poor. This largely comes from stereotyping and public ignorance, partly attributable to US-based media.

Johnson's Law is essential here. The media have full freedom in the west to say as they please. It is possible that they can spout the CIA line on an issue, like this, on which they have no real stake in exchange for more freedom later. Since there are few that can refute errors and even fewer who care to take the time, anything the major presses say is fact. Even if they are refuted, it is short-lived, and the western media consensus, after a time, becomes a fact of history rather than a tenuous opinion.

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