



Cold War redux in US–Russia relations? The effects of US media framing and public opinion of the 2008 Russia–Georgia war



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Cold War rhetoric in US–Russia relations by looking at the 2008 Russia–Georgia war as a major breaking point. We investigate the links between media, public opinion and foreign policy. In our content analysis of the coverage in two major US newspapers, we find that the framing of the conflict was anti-Russia, especially in the initial stages of the conflict. In addition, our survey results demonstrate that an increase in the media exposure of US respondents increased the likelihood of blaming Russia exclusively in the conflict. This case study helps us understand how media can be powerful in constructing a certain narrative of an international conflict, which can then affect public perceptions of other countries. We believe that the negative framing of Russia in the US media has had important implications for the already-tenuous relations between the US and Russia by reviving and perpetuating the Cold War mentality for the public as well as for foreign policymakers.

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Even though the Cold War ended over twenty years ago, its legacy still permeates the discourse among politicians, the media, and consequently the public at large in both Russia and the United States. Cold War remains the default paradigm for viewing US–Russia relations. One palpable example of this is the US Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's pre-election comment in March 2012 that Russia is "without a question" the number one geopolitical foe for the United States (Oppel, 2012). Russian president Vladimir Putin also mirrored this Cold War mentality during his 2012 campaign with his anti-American rhetoric (CBS News, 2012). More often than not, however, this discourse becomes rampant among elites and media amidst diplomatic crises and targets mainly the domestic audience.

There are certainly many historical, geostrategic, economic and political factors that shape the foreign policies of the United States and Russia towards one another. Nonetheless, the stereotypical negative image of the 'other' perpetuates the distrust, suspicion and confrontation among foreign policy elites and limits the choices available for diplomatic engagement. What we are interested in this article is how this mentality of mutual bias is revived at certain times. We start with the assertion that the Cold War mentality is not a constant but that it is reignited during times of international crises, such as the Kosovo war in 1999, Iraqi invasion of 2003, or the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004. These breaking points in relations get reported and interpreted by the media in frames that are unfavorable and critical of the other side. The public generally lacks interest in or access to information on international events, which by their very nature are very complex. As such, people take

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their cues from the media in formulating their opinion of the other side. The media plays a key role in interpreting such events for the broader public.

Meanwhile, the foreign policy elite uses these media frames and public perceptions to decide which foreign policy behavior is acceptable and justifiable. The media gives priority to certain issues and perspectives and puts them on the political agenda of decision-makers. The connections between media framing, public opinion and foreign policy are certainly far from being simple and straight-forward. The literature, in fact, outlines a dizzying array of interactions between the public, leaders and the media in very complex and circular ways. For instance, the media is shown to have a strong agenda-setting function for foreign policy-makers (Denhan, 1997; Malek, 1996; Merrill, 1995; Robinson, 2000; Hallin, 1994). Alternatively, it is argued that the media is largely influenced by elite rhetoric (Entman and Page, 1994; Zaller and Chiu, 2000; Bennett et al., 2006) and that the public opinion relies on information shortcuts or heuristic cues (Sniderman et al., 1991; Popkin, 1994) that are mainly opinions of trusted elites as reflected by the media (Auerbach and Bloch-Elkon, 2005; Groeling and Baum, 2008). Identifying the exact contours of this interdependent relationship and the direction of influence among these three central variables has been a core difficulty in research efforts; and in this paper our goal is not to resolve this complexity. Instead, we focus on the particular role the media plays in constructing a narrative around such crises and shaping public opinion. We believe that the media construction of crises and the consequent public opinion have had a significant effect on triggering and perpetuating the Cold War mentality that continue to influence relations between the two countries.

The 2008 Russia–Georgia war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia is one such breaking point in the relations between the two countries. After a series of clashes between the South Ossetian militia and Georgian army troops throughout the summer, on the eve of August 7, Georgia launched a military attack on South Ossetia's capital, Tskhinvali. The next day, Russia responded with a large-scale air and ground attack on Georgia. Not only did Russian troops gain control over South Ossetian territory but they also entered Georgia proper and occupied Georgian cities of Poti and Gori quickly. On August 12, the two sides agreed to a French-brokered ceasefire and Russian president Medvedev ordered an end to Russian military operations in Georgia. On August 26, the Russian government recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and finally after much delay completed the withdrawal of majority of its troops from Georgia by October 8. The five-day war killed hundreds, and left thousands of refugees in temporary shelters. The war was seen by many as the lowest point in US–Russia relations since the Cold War, if not an affirmation of the new Cold War itself (King, 2008; Sestanovich, 2008).

In this article, we focus on the way the US elite media framed this conflict and how this framing affected the way the American public assigned blame in the war.¹ We believe that the case study of the 2008 Russia–Georgia war offers a hard test for the role the media plays in perpetuating the Cold War mentality. First of all, this was a war that the US was not directly involved in. There were no vital US interests involved to give the media a mobilizing or “rally around the flag” mission.² Therefore, there were not many reasons for the media to be unfavorable towards Russia in reporting the conflict.

Secondly, given the complexity of the conflict, there was no obvious, undisputed aggressor in this war. There were in fact two intertwined wars: an intrastate war between Georgia and its breakaway region South Ossetia and an inter-state war between Russia and Georgia. There were two contradictory interpretations of what actually happened and thus no overwhelming incentive for the US media to be favorable to Georgia over Russia. The Russian side (as well as the South Ossetian leaders) accused the Georgian government for starting the war. They claimed that Georgia attacked South Ossetia and committed acts of genocide against South Ossetians as well as Russian peacekeepers in the region. They argued that Russia got involved only to protect the Russian peacekeepers and compatriots in South Ossetia. The Georgian side, on the other hand, argued that it was merely protecting its territorial integrity. The government claimed the attacks were a response to the heavy shelling of Georgian villages by South Ossetian militia and Russian troops. It accused Russia for using the skirmishes between South Ossetian rebel groups and the Georgian government as a pretext to invade Georgia and punish her for her pro-Western orientation and democratic government.

Even though there was imbalance in the use of force by the militarily much stronger side, Russia, there were many third-party accounts from intelligence agencies, human rights organizations and scholars that challenged the view that Georgia was victimized by Russian aggressiveness (Chivers and Barry, 2008; Ertel et al., 2008; Hahn, 2008; Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist, 2009; Tsygankov, 2010). For instance, the much-anticipated September 2009 report of the European Union's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFMCG) laid the blame for initiating the armed conflict at Georgia's feet, but suggested that both parties share the blame for the long-simmering conflict (Lobjakas, 2009). Moreover, the European media outlets have used very different frames in their coverage of this conflict, demonstrating that the negative framing of Russia's role in this conflict was not necessarily warranted by the events on the ground.³

Despite the lack of a compelling reason to take sides, the US media was accused of being biased against Russia in the coverage of the conflict. One of the first people to openly voice this claim was former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. In a New York Times opinion piece, dated August 20, Gorbachev accused the West of mounting “a propaganda attack against

¹ A similar analysis of the Russian media coverage and public opinion responses no doubt would provide valuable and interesting comparisons but it is beyond the scope of this article.

² In this approach, the media tends to view their task in terms of reinforcing national consensus and is highly supportive of the government especially when national interest is threatened.

³ ‘Campaign in the Air Waves: Europeans Divided on Georgian War: European Media’, *EU-Russia Center* (2008), available at <http://www.eu-russiacentre.org>. This article argues that the leading European media is divided on whom to blame for the conflict, reflecting the political divisions within the EU as well as the status of their relationship with Russia.

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