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Oxford**

‘With Or Without Georgia?’

Portrayal of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in
The New York Times, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*,
The Guardian and *Novaya gazeta* during the
conflicts of 2004, 2006 and 2008

by Salla Nazarenko

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“Other people’s nationalisms are like other people’s love affairs, or, indeed, like dog fights. These are things wise people don’t get involved in.”

Mark Almond in *The Guardian*, 9.8.2008

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Prologue

It was a rainy night in November 2007 in Tskhinval/I,¹ the capital of the unrecognized republic of South Ossetia, when Dima’s phone rang. We were sitting in the living room of an Ossetian family, enjoying delicious Ossetian food and home-made wine. The men in our entourage had just switched their wine glasses for a huge horn, which went round the table, implicating a long evening to come.

Dima apologized and left the table, but I listened to him as he spoke in Russian.

“*Da*”, he uttered, “yes, seriously, I am in Tskhinvali, and I am getting drunk”. Smiling, he put the phone away, and told me that it was his friend from Sukhum/i, who was curious to know what was going on in Tbilisi at the moment.

¹ The spelling of the names of the capitals of these two unrecognized republics is a controversial issue between Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. “Sukhumi” and “Tshkinvali” are considered Georgian spellings of the names; the Abkhaz and South Ossetians use the form “Sukhum” and “Tskhinval”. I use the forms “Tskhinval/i” and “Sukhum/i” throughout this research.

What made the story interesting was that Dima is a Georgian. A Georgian in Tskhinval/i, talking to an Abkhaz over the phone, is not something you encounter every day in today's South Caucasus, and, after the five days of bloodshed in August 2008, situations like this have become almost unimaginable.

This research is inspired by my numerous trips around the South Caucasus between April 2007 and July 2008, when I lived and worked in Tbilisi. This is devoted to the people I met in Sukhum/i, Tskhinval/i, Tbilisi, Baku, Yerevan, Stepanakert and other places; to their hospitality, their warmth and their grief after yet another war.

I do not know what happened in August 2008 to the wonderful family that had invited us into their home in Tskhinval/i less than a year earlier. Is their house still there? Did they have to flee? What I know for sure that some of the members of the group of journalists I was leading were compelled to witness a brutal war.

My passion – even before the war – was to understand how the West sees Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Why did Kosovo have the right to self-determination, while Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not? Why did the people in both regions feel that they had no choice but to accept being *de facto* annexed by Russia? Why was the question so painful for Georgia – too painful to discuss it with open eyes and ears?

This small research project cannot answer most of those questions, but I hope that it will open the door to understanding the complexity of the situation, and the difficulties that journalists face in reporting it.

1. Introduction

The basic ideals of journalism face their greatest challenge during war and conflict. The need to be short, concrete, balanced and able to report an extremely complicated situation to a more or less ignorant audience makes the job very hard, even for the best of us.

The war in South Ossetia and Georgia in August 2008 was no exception. It arose unexpectedly for the outside world, in an obscure place, in a situation where both sides had hired PR companies to construct their own narratives of the war, and it happened during the Summer Olympics and the holiday season for most Europeans.

This research aims to examine how the two breakaway territories of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have been reported in the press during the conflict of August 2008 as well as during the previous outbursts of “frozen conflicts” in 2004 and 2006.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia have never been high on the news agenda of the Western press, nor have they been high on the agenda of Western politics. A simple search via the Internet shows where South Ossetia and Abkhazia stand on the agenda of the mainstream news organizations: for instance, on CNN’s website, www.cnn.com, a search for the word “Abkhazia” produces 75 results and “South Ossetia” 99. Typing in the names of other regions struggling for their independence produces entirely different numbers of hits: 1,538 for “Palestine”, 2,668 for “Kosovo” and 555 for “Basque”. The term “Chechnya” produces 808 hits. It is clear that there is an order of importance for conflicts; but on what is this based? Neither geography, nor the number of victims, nor the involvement of great powers can fully explain the way in which the world (of journalism sees) – or is supposed to see – a certain conflict.

Those five days in August 2008 clearly gave South Ossetia its fifteen minutes of fame. The region stayed on the news agenda for several months, up until the crisis of Gaza in late 2008 finally took the world’s remaining attention away from Georgia and South Ossetia.

When starting this research, my – quite self-evident – assumption was that, as Russia became a more visible participant in the war, the tone and volume of the reporting on South Ossetia and Abkhazia changed as well. It is clear that the war in August was a bigger conflict than the outbursts of violence that occurred in 2004 and 2006, which explains the change in news coverage, but did the way in which South Ossetia and

Abkhazia were portrayed change, when comparing the coverage with previous conflicts, and, if so, how? Who got to talk and comment about South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and what kind of discourses prevailed during August 2008 and the summers of 2004 and 2006? Were journalists able to avoid falling into the propaganda traps set by both sides, and was the coverage of the August 2008 war biased in any way? Finally, what factors affected the coverage? Was it all about structures and the news machine's needs of the day, or did journalists follow their national agendas when reporting this distant conflict, that was suddenly brought nearer by Russia's involvement?

This research aims to answer these questions by:

- 1) Analyzing the reportage during the first days of the August 2008 war as well as during the summers of 2004 and 2006 using quantitative content analysis.

These two time periods have been chosen because I assume that, during escalations of the conflict, there was more coverage of Abkhazia and South Ossetia than at times when nothing "newsworthy" happened in these regions.

- 2) Looking at the way certain historical analogies, terms and words have been used in newspaper texts.

This approach was inspired firstly by my own experience of following the coverage of the war in Finland, Russia and Georgia, and, secondly, by numerous conversations with journalist colleagues and experts on Georgia. From the beginning of this war, both sides relied on PR agencies to develop favourable narratives of the war,² and historical analogies with and comparisons to previous conflicts were widely used.³ A discourse dominated by propaganda will only allow two positions: for or against, describing the conflict in a radically polarized way – as a struggle between the 'good guys and the bad guys'.⁴ This kind of dichotomy fits the conventions of journalism. As a well-known columnist commented at a Reuters Institute seminar in spring 2009:

"It has always been so, that, in a major crisis, the press looks for a bully and an underdog, and it will always be so."

² See, for instance

http://www.mediabistro.com/prnewser/politics/russia_vs_georgia_pr_war_continues_92809.asp

³ Interview with Ben Judah, April 26th, 2009.

⁴ Nohrsted et al.: From the Persian Gulf to Kosovo – War Journalism and Propaganda. *European Journal of Communication*, Vol 15(3), 2000, p 384.

With the help of this mixture of quantitative and qualitative analysis of texts, the overall patterns of reporting are being analyzed and comparisons made, both in time and between the individual newspapers/countries in question. In the end, I have drawn conclusions about what factors affect reportage, from technological requirements to the preferences of individual journalists. This part of the analysis is largely based on interviews with the journalists and editors who were involved in reporting the war in August 2008.

2. A short history of the conflict

The August 2008 war hardly came as a surprise to anyone even superficially familiar with the situation in the South Caucasus area. The war was another link in a continuing chain of hostilities between Georgia and its two breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The problems date back to the early 1990's and are partially due to the Stalin-era nationalism policies of the Soviet Union. The previous war left the political situation unresolved and those on all sides bitter and traumatized. In Georgia in the early 1990s, radical nationalist groups, some linked to the local security services, gained substantial political influence and created an environment of intolerance.⁵

The problems were accelerated by the policies of Georgia's first President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a Soviet-era dissident, human rights activist and hero of the national movement during the Glasnost years. His short career as a politician was marked by an increasingly authoritarian attitude combined with his theories about the "spiritual mission of Georgia" and "ethnogeny of Georgians". His definition of "Georgianness" was very narrow, as it encompassed only ethnic Georgians and the Georgian Orthodox church, thus creating the conditions that led to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁶

Gamsakhurdia had already fled Georgia by January 1992, when the country was falling apart under the pressure of ethnic conflict and civil war. He died in December 1993 in suspicious circumstances. Most observers believe that Gamsakhurdia's death was caused by suicide.⁷

In Abkhazia, the first blood had already been spilt in 1989, over a row about the creation of a branch of the Tbilisi State University in Sukhum'i. The tension increased around the break-up of the Soviet Union, and Georgia's return to its 1921 constitution eventually led to a military conflict between August 1992 and September 1993, as the Abkhaz troops broke a previously negotiated ceasefire agreement and gained control of almost all Abkhazia, with the exception of the upper gorge of the Kodori river. Most

⁵ ⁵ International Crisis Group: *Europe Report* # 176, 15 Sept 2006.

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4377&CFID=1666239&CFTOKEN=68537651>.

⁶ Sue Davis: Elections, Legitimacy, Media and Democracy: The Case of Georgia. *Nationalities papers*, Vol 36, issue 3, July 2008, p. 472.

⁷ Christoph Zürcher: *Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York: New York University Press 2007.

ethnic Georgians fled. The Georgian authorities state – with the backing of several OSCE declarations – that this was the result of ethnic cleansing by the Abkhaz forces. The conflict over South Ossetia began in 1989, as the Ossetians sent a plea to the Georgian Supreme Soviet for the region to be made an Autonomous Republic, infuriating the Georgian authorities. The inter-ethnic problems continued through 1990, until direct military confrontation began in January 1991, when several thousand Georgian troops entered Tskhinvali, leading to a year of chaos and urban warfare. On 24 June 1992, in the Russian city of Sochi, the then Russian and Georgian leaders, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze, signed an agreement that brought about a ceasefire, but the war's consequences proved devastating: some 1,000 dead, 100 missing, the extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure, and many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

2.1. The escalations of 2004 and 2006

In my research, I have concentrated on three time periods subsequently: the summer (1st of June until 31st of August) of 2004, the same period in 2006 and the 8th to 15th of August in 2008. The two time periods in 2004 and 2006 witnessed the two previous serious escalations of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, minor clashes in the areas bordering Abkhazia and South Ossetia had become regular occurrences over the years.

In 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili began implementing what he described as his main goal: the restoration of territorial integrity. After a successful operation to oust a breakaway leader in the Black Sea region of Adjara, Saakashvili began working on his second goal, South Ossetia. Georgia had already initiated a major anti-smuggling campaign by December 2003, and this was reinforced in May 2004.⁸ The Georgian Interior Ministry troops established checkpoints around the Georgian villages in South Ossetia. The South Ossetian side perceived this as preparation for a military conflict. By late July, the conflict had, in effect, developed into a state of war. The hostilities stopped eventually after mid-August, when the Joint Control Commission, officially in charge of conflict resolution, negotiated an end to the hostilities.

⁸ International Crisis Group: *Europe Report* # 159, 26 November 2004
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3128&l=1>.

In July 2006, a forceful Georgian police operation cleared a renegade militia out of the upper Kodori Gorge, the one part of pre-war Abkhazia that was not controlled by the *de facto* government in Sukhum/i.⁹ The crisis in the Kodori Gorge started on 22 July 2006, when Emzar Kvitsiani, the presidential representative sent to the gorge under ex-President Eduard Shevardnadze, defied an order to disband his militia, and called for the dismissal of the Interior Minister Merabishvili in connection with the murder of the banker Sandro Girgvliani in the previous January. Tensions quickly escalated when the government, labeling Kvitsiani a "traitor" and a Russian pawn, refused to negotiate with the militia.¹⁰ By the end of July, the government forces controlled most of the gorge and Kvitsiani had escaped.

2.2. The Five-Day War of August 2008

The war between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway region of South Ossetia began officially close to midnight on 7 August 2008, when a senior Georgian military official announced that Tbilisi had decided to restore "constitutional order" in South Ossetia.¹¹ The Georgians claimed that the Ossetians were shelling the ethnic Georgian villages and positions, and had failed to respond to the unilateral ceasefire initiated by the Georgian side earlier that day.¹² By 1:00 am on 8 August, for Georgian troops had launched a large-scale military offensive against Tskhinval/i, supported by artillery, and advanced quickly. Meanwhile,¹³ the tank columns of the Russian 58th Army started crossing into Georgia from the Roki tunnel that separates North and South Ossetia. At the same time, a second front opened in Western Georgia, where the forces of another breakaway republic, Abkhazia, started a military operation in the Kodori Gorge, an area taken over by Georgia in the summer of 2006.

⁹ International Crisis Group: *Europe report* # 176, 15 September 2006, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4377&CFID=1666239&CFTOKEN=68537651>.

¹⁰ Molly Corso: *Georgian minister : Kodorgi Gorge Operation Winding Down*. <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav072706b.shtml>.

¹¹ This account is largely based on the International Crisis Group's *Europe Report* N°195, 22 August 2008, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5636&l=1>.

¹² The Georgian and Russian sides still disagree about the August war. See, for instance <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20648&search=disagree%20on%20August%20war>.

¹³ There is no independent verification of whether the Russian tanks entered South Ossetia before or after the Georgian attack on Tskhinval/i.

These events were preceded by a summer full of mutual provocation, including the detention of four Georgian peacekeepers by the South Ossetian *de facto* authorities as well as the reinforcement of the forces and weaponry on both sides of the conflict, in violation of the ceasefire agreements. Russia had also bolstered its position in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

On August 8th, Russia and Georgia fought intensely over Tskhinval/i. However, it soon became clear that the Russian tank columns were forcing Georgians to retreat.

The clashes between Georgians, Russians and Ossetians continued, with the Georgians using artillery to shell Tskhinval/i, where the Russian and South Ossetian forces had taken up position. According to the International Crisis Group, the Georgian military says that it withdrew its last troops from all of South Ossetia at 5:00am on 11 August. The following day, the sides signed a six-point ceasefire document, mediated by the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. Both sides have been accused of violating the laws of war and failing to protect civilians.¹⁴

The borders of South Ossetia are typical Stalin-era borders; inside the region, there is (was) a considerable number of ethnic Georgians.¹⁵ The Soviet authorities believed that this kind of ethnogeography made it hard for the residents of the region to claim independence. Almost all of the main roads in the area cross both South Ossetia and Georgia proper. Before the war, the population of South Ossetia was estimated to be around 40,000-50,000 people,¹⁶ approximately half of whom were ethnic Georgians living in Georgian enclaves. The three Georgian enclaves were administered by the authorities of Georgia proper, using the Georgian currency and following the Georgian time zone. The areas controlled by the *de facto* authorities of Tskhinval/i follow Moscow time and use the Russian rouble. The law-enforcement agencies are South Ossetian, and the Georgian authorities did not control the area in any way.

2.3. The situation today

The early 1990's conflicts in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain unresolved, even today. Conflict management has failed, both politically and militarily. Politically, in South Ossetia, the biggest problem has been the format of the

¹⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7847285.stm>.

¹⁵ This part is borrowed from a confidential military report.

¹⁶ There is no reliable information about the exact population of South Ossetia.

negotiations, that Georgia found particularly unsuitable, as well as the question of the status of the region. Militarily, the problem was the partiality of the peacekeeping forces in the area. All sides used the forces for their own purposes.¹⁷ In Abkhazia, the main two issues have been the status of the region as well as the question of internally displaced persons (IDP's).

After the August war, Russia took the unexpected step of recognizing the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This changed the situation in the region in numerous ways; firstly, by giving the *de facto* states a new sense of self-confidence and sealing their already strong sense that they will never be a part of Georgia again. Secondly, the fact that, so far, only Russia and Nicaragua have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia adds to the dependency of the regions on Russia. In May 2009, numerous opposition figures in Abkhazia expressed their concern about the plans by President Bagapsh to hand over strategic objects, such as Sukhum/i airport and the railways, to Russian commercial entities.¹⁸ Even though the letter, written to President Medvedev, Prime Minister Putin, Minister for Foreign Affairs Lavrov and the Chairman of State, Duma Gryzlov, was written in a very cautious and respectful tone, it is clear that Abkhazia is becoming increasingly worried about the growing Russian influence in the region.

At the same time, Mikheil Saakashvili keeps talking about the reunification of Georgia. During spring 2009, the country has been sliding towards an increasingly serious political crisis, when the opposition politicians demanded the resignation of Saakashvili, one of the reasons being the August 2008 war.

¹⁷ From a confidential military report.

¹⁸ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1167147.html>.

3. Previous research on the subject

Other research on this subject is, at the time of writing, quite scarce. A joint international research project analyzing the news and commentary about the conflict in the Caucasus in the press of Finland, Sweden, Germany, Poland and Estonia is currently ongoing. A Finnish researcher made a short comparison of how the war was reported in the Finnish, Estonian and Russian press.¹⁹ The German press was investigated by a German journalist, Gemma Pörzgen.²⁰ A US-based think tank, the East View Information Services, published an extensive book²¹ about how the conflicts in South Ossetia were reported in Russia. This book was published in 2008, so it consists only of translations of stories from Russian newspapers as well as articles by Russian experts written between 1998 and 2007. The book provides no analysis of the reportage as such.

Conflict reporting as such is a popular target for research. Thousands of academic and non-academic papers, books and studies have been written about the mysteries of war reporting. Some researchers concentrate on war propaganda;²² others concentrate on one particular conflict and biased reporting of it; while others are interested in the national contexts of war reporting. Many journalists have also published their own accounts of working as war correspondents.²³

¹⁹ Jukka Pietiläinen: Georgian sodan erilaiset horisontit (Different Horizons of the War in Georgia) in Auli Harju (ed.) : *Journalismikritiikin vuosikirja 2009* (The Yearbook of Journalism Critics), University of Tampere, 2009.

²⁰ Gemma Pörzgen: Deutungskonflikt. Der Georgien-Krieg in Deutschen Printmedien. *Osteuropa*, 58, 11/2008, pp. 79-85.

²¹ Ana K. Niedermaier (ed.) : *Countdown to War in Georgia. Russia's Foreign Policy and Media Coverage of the Conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia*. East View Press, 2008.

²² See, for instance, Klaus Krippendorff: *Content Analysis. An Introduction to its Methodology*. Sage Publications inc. 2004, p. 8.

²³ A good example of this is a book by Oliver Poole: *Five Bloody Years in Baghdad*. London: Reportage Press 2008.

4. Research material

This paper consists of a content analysis of *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Novaya gazeta* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* over three different time periods: the first eight days of the war in August 2008, as well as the periods from the beginning of June to the end of August in both 2004 and 2006, respectively. I have selected all of the stories that contain the term either “South Ossetia” or “Abkhazia”. The exact classification of the stories is explained below.

I have used mainly the online versions of the newspapers, apart from *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *The Guardian* for August 2008, paper versions of which I analyzed. Originally, I aimed to use the paper versions of all of the papers for 2008, but there was a problem gaining access to the paper versions of *The New York Times* and *Novaya gazeta*. Altogether, I analyzed 174 stories from 2008, 50 from 2004 and 47 from 2006. The total number of stories analyzed was 271.

4.1 Choice of countries and newspapers researched

In order to see how the war in 2008 and the conflicts of 2004 and 2006 were reported, I wanted to choose newspapers from countries that were somewhat involved in the August 2008 conflict. This would mean that the journalists would cover it extensively, possibly from the ground.

Russia, as a party to the conflict, was a natural choice, but I did not analyze a Georgian paper as a counter-weight for several reasons. Firstly, the Georgian press is very weak and enjoys minimal circulation. There is only one daily newspaper in Georgia, and its circulation is only five thousand copies. Secondly, analyzing the Georgian press would have been impossible due to my very limited Georgian language skills. Thirdly, analyzing a Georgian and a Russian paper next to each other would have probably lead to an analysis of the propaganda of war, which was beyond the scope of this research.

Great Britain is a leading player in European politics, and British politicians reacted quickly to events. The Foreign Minister, David Miliband, and the opposition leader, David Cameron, quickly pronounced Russia the guilty party – the latter threatening to

stop Russians shopping at Selfridges,²⁴ a threat allegedly neutralized by a few phone-calls from West London stores, casinos, estate agents and schools.

Germany was allegedly one of the countries that stopped Georgia from entering NATO at the Bucharest summit in April.²⁵ Angela Merkel was outspoken on the issue, stating that it was “too early” to grant a Membership Action Plan to Georgia and the Ukraine. Germany also has traditionally enjoyed a special relationship with Russia, based mostly on mutual energy interests.

The United States was a self-evident choice, due to its very visible role in Georgia. George Bush’s administration supported Georgia heavily, both militarily and politically. At the outbreak of the war, there were 130 American military advisors on the ground. If this was the case, and if Saakashvili did consult with the Americans, then why the Bush administration did not step in to prevent the war is a question that is frequently asked.

My aim was also to choose a liberally oriented newspaper from each country. These loose criteria lead me to select the following four papers:

4.1.1. *The Guardian*

The Guardian is one of the best-known British dailies. It was founded in 1821, and today enjoys a daily circulation of 348,494 and a readership of over 1,2 million.²⁶ *The Guardian* advertises itself with the line “owned by no one –free to say anything”, referring to the fact that the newspaper is a foundation, not a profit-oriented business like most of its rivals. *The Guardian* has a very popular website: with 20-26 million users, it is the most widely read newspaper website in the UK.

4.1.2. *The New York Times*

The New York Times was established in 1851 and is today one of the most authoritative American daily newspapers. The newspaper is owned by *The New York Times* Company, which publishes 18 other newspapers. The company's chairman is

²⁴ See, for instance, Donald Rayfield: *Georgia and Russia: the aftermath*. In <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/georgia-and-russia-the-aftermath>.

²⁵ <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17508&search=Bucharest%20NATO>.

²⁶ <http://adinfo-guardian.co.uk/the-guardian/guardian-circulation-and-readership.shtml>.

Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr, whose family has controlled the paper since 1896. The paper's circulation is just over one million copies daily.

There has been much speculation about the future of *The New York Times* due to the overall crisis among newspapers as well as some of the credit arrangements of this particular newspaper.²⁷ However, at the time of writing, the newspaper has not implemented any substantial changes to its staffing or policy.

4.1.3. *Novaya gazeta*

Novaya gazeta is a private²⁸ Russian newspaper, that became widely known to the outside world after the assassination of its most famous journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, in October 2006. Three other journalists working for the paper have been murdered since 2001. The paper was founded in 1993, with the help of the last President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, who, together with another prominent Russian politician, Alexander Lebedev, owns 49% of the shares in the newspaper. The remaining 51% belong to the staff. The paper's daily circulation is slightly over 170,000 copies.

4.1.4. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

Süddeutsche Zeitung is published in Munich, Southern Germany. Wikipedia calls it “the largest German national subscription daily newspaper”.²⁹ Its daily circulation is 445,000 copies, and it reaches an audience of 1.26 million readers.³⁰ According to the statistics released by the paper itself, this makes it one of the biggest regional dailies in the country, leaving behind, among others, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt*.

²⁷ See, for instance, http://www.poynter.org/forum/view_post.asp?id=13765.

²⁸ I prefer to use the term “private” rather than “independent” when discussing the press in post-communist countries.

²⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%BCddeutsche_Zeitung.

³⁰ http://mediadaten.sueddeutsche.de/home/files/argumente_0109.pdf?ID=bf7f0b71938ba677dbf188c99bb7ba39.

5. Methodology

The research method employed in this paper can be described as a combination of quantitative content analysis and discourse analysis, or a combination of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ content analysis. As pointed out by Trowler (1996),

“The hard approach to content analysis is simply to count the frequency of words or seconds of airtime coverage and other discrete quantifiable bits of data. The soft approach uses trained coders to make a judgement about the meanings of words, phrases or images in context and then allocate them to categories. The resulting data are then quantified.”

Content analysis was chosen as the research Method, because it can provide a general impression about media content using verifiable numerical data. However, one needs to remember that content analysis is never a straightforwardly quantitative method. Firstly, the data it reveals are not obvious to the audience: the process of the research itself produces a new meaning.³¹ The analysis must predict or infer phenomena that cannot be observed directly.³²

As Michelle Jackson wrote,³³ in some senses, content analysis lies between the quantitative and qualitative divide by embodying the qualitative methods of interpretation and close reading of texts, turning these features into qualitative data.

Herein lie also the problems with this method. Sometimes, turning large amounts of close reading into statistics can make the analysis appear sporadic and difficult to analyze. I am aware of this problem, and tried to avoid it by asking several experienced media researchers to read and comment on my findings. All possible problems and inconsistencies remaining in this paper are, naturally, my own.

This paper relies on both “hard content analysis” and a “soft approach”, that is based on my own categorization and analysis of newspaper texts. The work consists of several parts. The first part (Chapter 6) displays a basic classification of the data that explores in which categories stories about Abkhazia and South Ossetia appear.

Further, Chapter 6 considers the geography of the news – where were the journalists covering the conflict located geographically at the time? This part is related to my

³¹ Trowler, Paul. *Investigating Mass Media*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1996.

³² Krippendorff, Klaus: *Content Analysis. An Introduction to Its Methodology*. London: Sage Publications Inc, 2004.

³³ Jackson, Michelle: Content Analysis, in Neale, Jo (ed): *Research Methods for Health and Social Care*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009.

question about which factors affect reportage. The access to sources and geographical location of the journalists covering a war is likely to affect the way in which a certain situation is covered. Chapter 6 also analyses the “voices” of the news, examining which sources (official vs “the people’s voice”) are used by the papers. Finally, chapter 6 explores the connections between the geography of the news, story type and voices.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the language of the news. This analysis is motivated by the extensive PR surrounding the conflicts as well as my own experiences of following their coverage, as was explained in more detail in Chapter 1. Chapter 7 analyzes the ways in which certain words, metaphors and concepts were used in the texts (“Cold War”, “Aggression”, “Democracy”), and explores how certain historical comparisons to previous conflicts appear in the texts.

Chapter 7 also reveals, whether Russian war propaganda claiming that 2000 people died during the first days of the conflict ended up on the pages of the papers. The last part of Chapter 7 is devoted to discussing which names or attributes the papers used for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Attention has been paid to the appearance of phrases like “separatist region” versus the more neutral and legally correct *de facto* state”. Chapter 8 combines the results and analyzes them, together with interviews conducted with journalists, editors and experts.

6. Basic classification of the data

The stories were basically classified by dividing all of the data into categories, including news, features, news analysis, editorial/comment, sports coverages, the economy and other. The classification has sometimes followed the newspaper's own line – as in the case of *The New York Times*, that would classify some of its stories as “news analysis”. Sometimes, I have classified the stories myself, separating news from news analysis by seeing how much background and journalists' own judgements are contained in the story. *Novaya gazeta's* stories were somewhat more challenging to classify in the same way as those of the other papers, due to the traditions of the Russian press. In the Soviet period, the journalist was perceived as a public worker and publicist, and newspaper stories resembled literary essays more than fact-based accounts. Even though the collapse of the communist system changed how the press operates, and many journalists recognized the need to provide news based on actual events and facts, the tradition of advocacy journalism and literary style has lingered at least partially on the pages of Russian newspapers.³⁴

Even today, Russian newspapers often write very personalized stories, where the journalist does not try to hide behind the veil of “objectivity”. Anna Politkovskaya's reporting was a good example of this.³⁵

This is why I have classified *Novaya gazeta's* stories into news, features and news analysis (my own classification), with **news** being short pieces of information, often describing a single event or statement, **news analysis** being stories built around a news event, but extending from it and seeking different viewpoints (including stories and NG's examinations of blogs and foreign newspapers' comments about the war), and **features being** longer reports, in which the journalists' personality plays a prominent role (for instance, stories in which *Novaya gazeta's* journalists travel with Russian military convoys, describing the trip in great detail, are classified as features). For my analysis, I selected all of the stories that mention the word “Abkhazia” and/or “South Ossetia” (in the respective languages). However, I omitted the readers' letters in *The Guardian's* “Comment Is Free” section, as well as the news agency material

³⁴ Hedwig de Smaele: The Applicability of Western Media Models on the Russian Media System. *European Journal of Communication* Vol 14/173, 1999.

³⁵ See, for instance, Anna Politkovskaya's best-known book, *Putin's Russia*. London: Harvill 2004.

from *Novaya gazeta's* website. The amount of the latter would have been simply overwhelming, so I chose only stories bylined by *Novaya gazeta's* own journalists. Figures 1 to 4 demonstrate the classification of stories in 2008; figures 4 to 8 in 2006 and figures 8 to 12 in 2004:

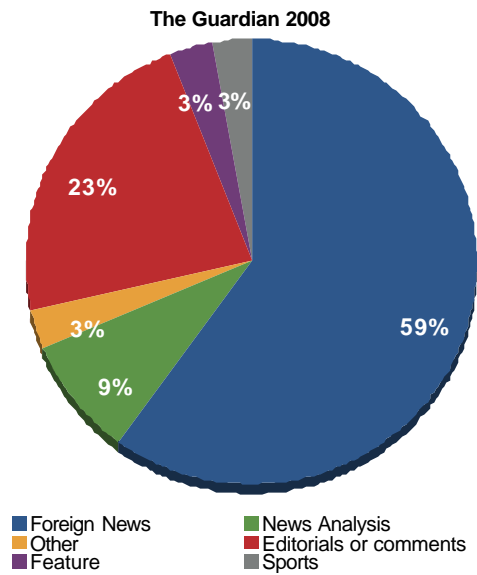


Figure 1 N=35 stories

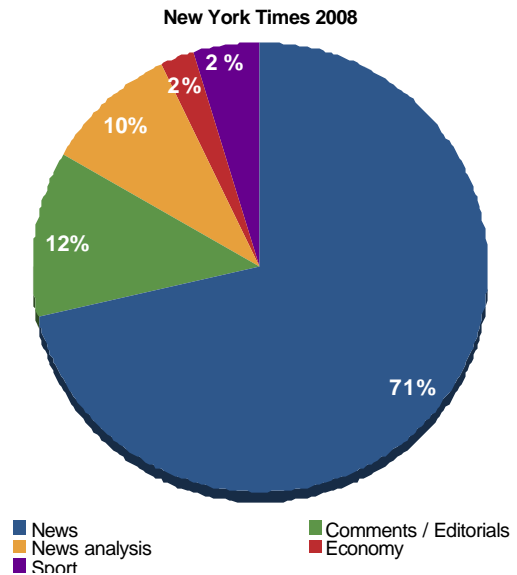


Figure 2 N=42 stories

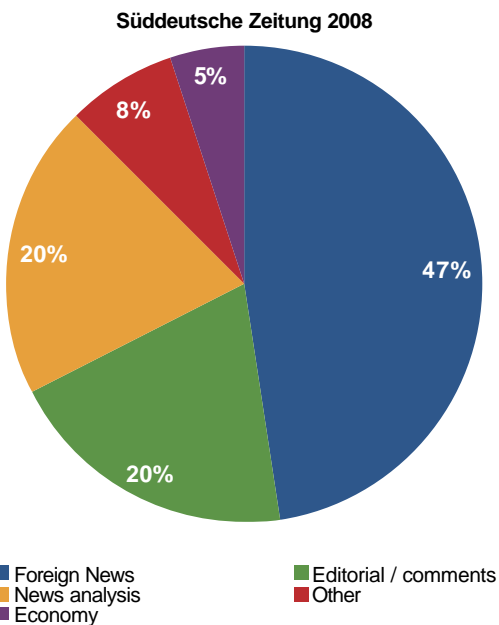


Figure 3 N=40 stories

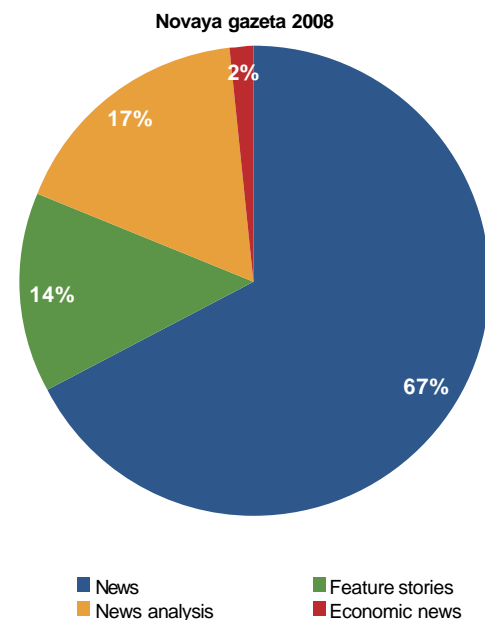


Figure 4 N=58 stories

As can be seen from Figures 1 to 4, the biggest category of stories analyzed between 8th and 15th of August, 2008, are news. This was an expected result, since the war was high on the news agenda of all of the papers.

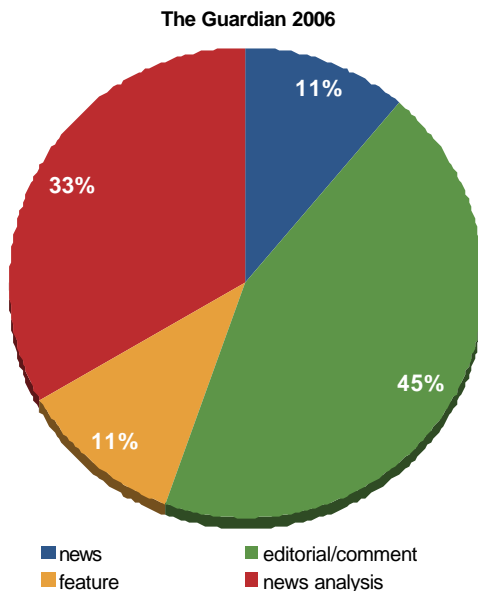


Figure 5

N=9 stories

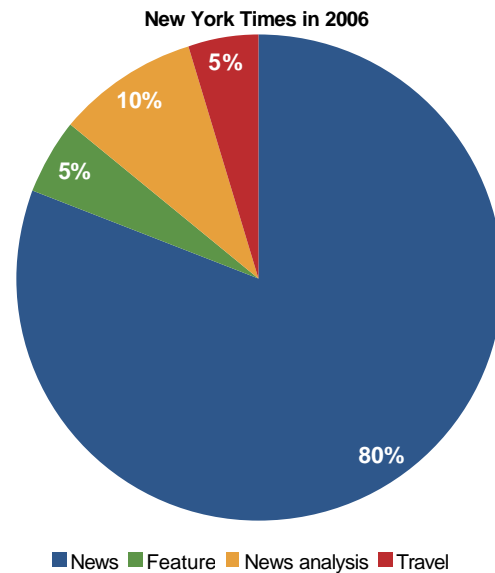


Figure 6

N=21 stories

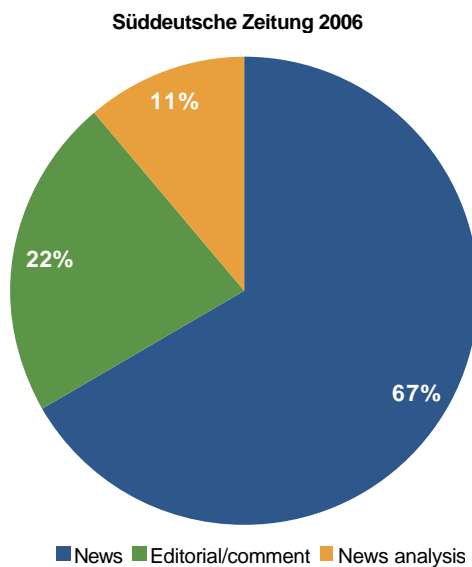


Figure 7

N=9 stories

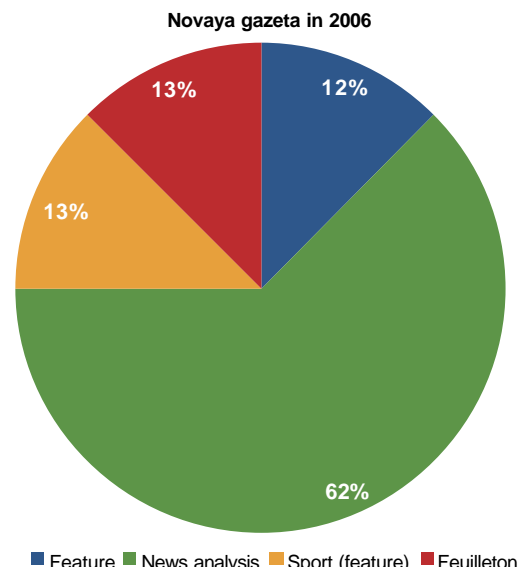


Figure 8

N=8 stories

Similarly, in 2006, the biggest category is news. However, in *The Guardian*, Abkhazia and South Ossetia appeared more often in editorials and comment stories than in the news.

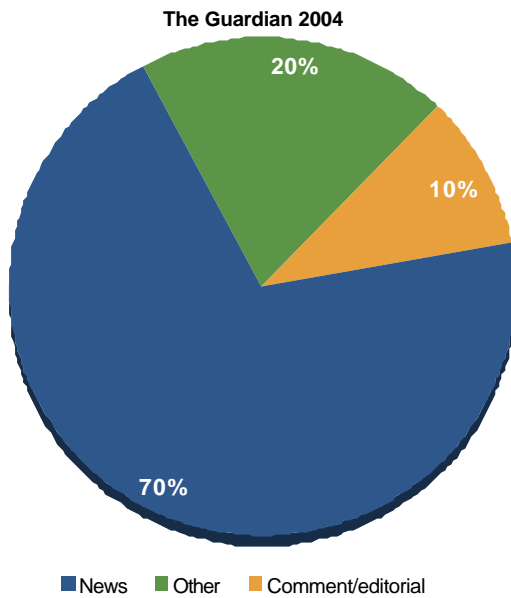


Figure 9 N=10 stories

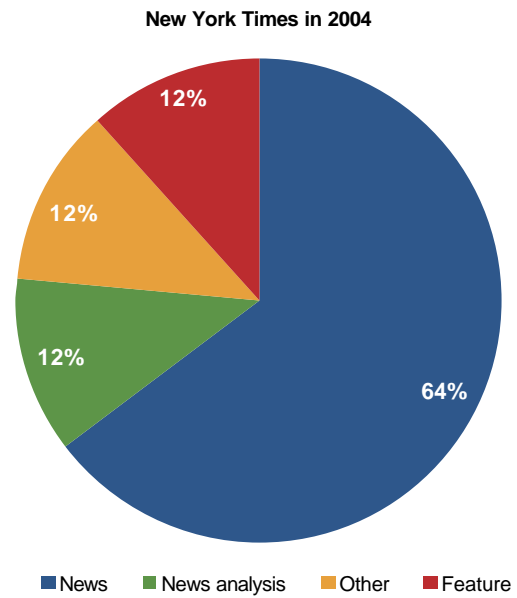


Figure 10 N=17 stories

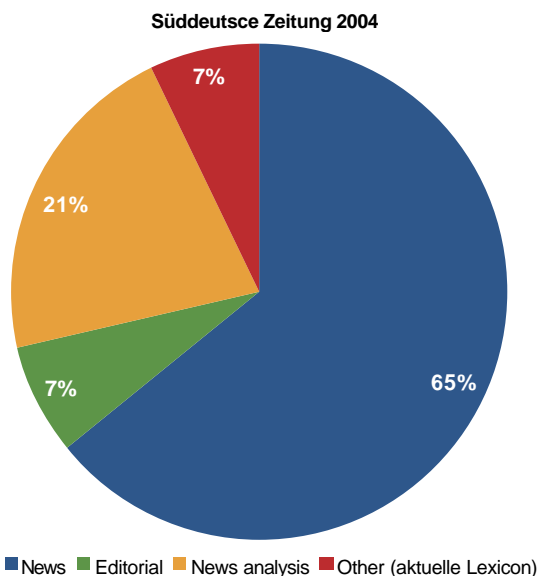


Figure 11 N=14 stories

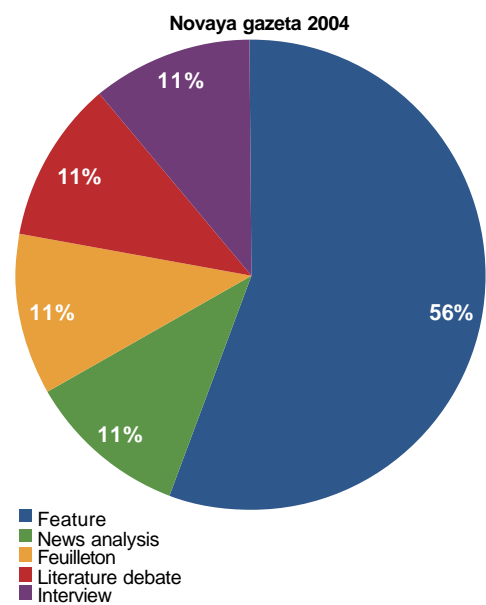


Figure 12 N=9 stories

Again, in 2004, Abkhazia and South Ossetia appeared most often in news pieces. *Novaya gazeta's* reportage in 2004 and 2006, however, was quite different to that in 2008. Abkhazia and South Ossetia appeared more often in features than in the news. They appeared, for instance, in a very long investigative story about Al-Qaeda's connections with Kabardino-Balkaria in the Russian North Caucasus; in a literary debate about the legacy of the Abkhaz writer, Fazil Iskander, and in an interview with a former Georgian dissident. All of these stories could be called essays rather than reportage.

6.1. The Geography of the News

When reporting a distant conflict, an important question is whether the journalists have a chance to be there. In order to see how many of the papers were actually able to send their own journalists to Georgia, and where they were physically based, I analyzed the geographical locations from which the news stories were bylined. Figures 13 to 16 show the geography of the news in August 2008. The figures are absolute numbers, not percentages, and they concentrate on stories classified as news or news analysis, rather than as comments, editorials, etc.

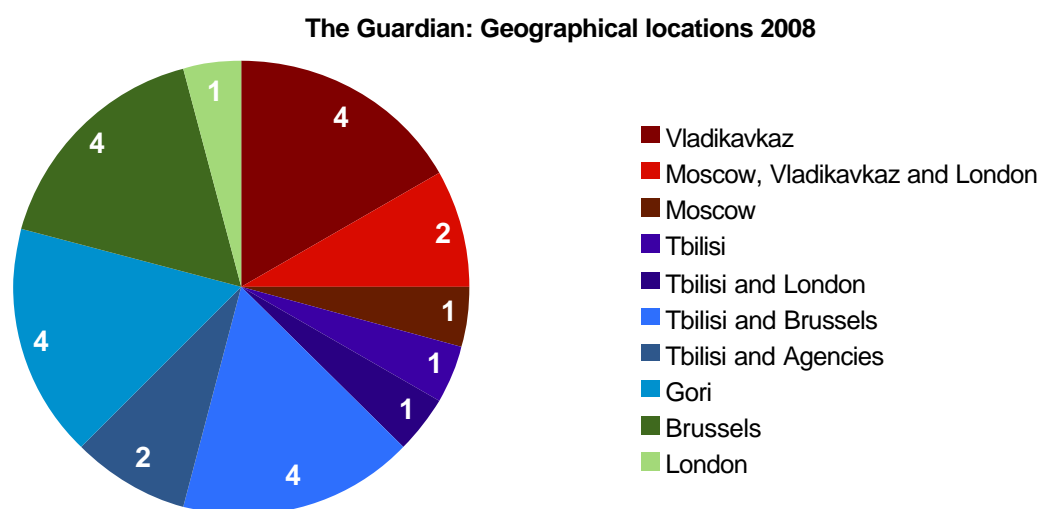


Figure 13

N = 24 stories

The Guardian's news and news analysis pieces were often bylined in Georgia or Russia. The newspaper had one correspondent in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia – the place where most of the Ossetian refugees from the bombed South Ossetia would go – and another in Gori, a bombed city in Georgia close to the South Ossetian border.

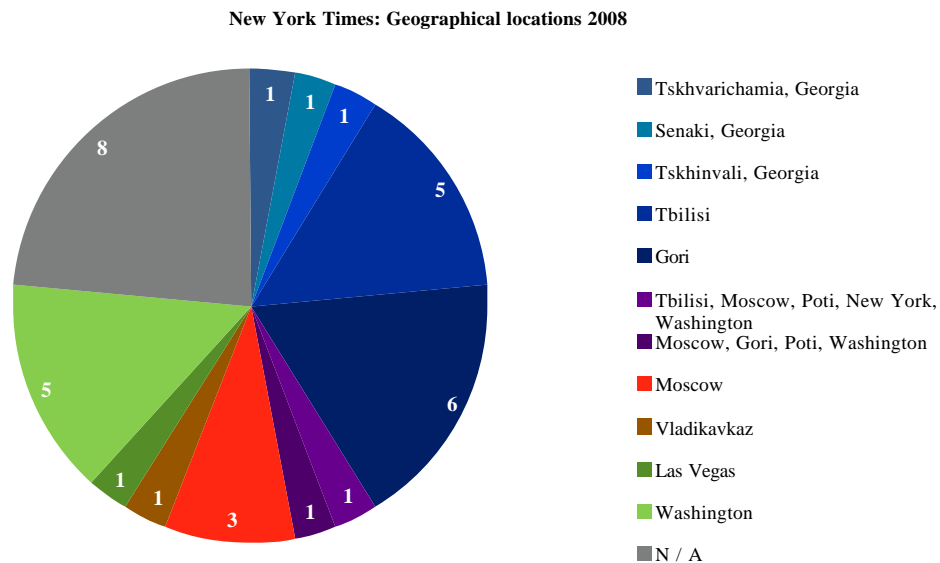


Figure 14

N=34

The New York Times, like *The Guardian*, had a chance to cover the August 2008 events from multiple locations. The paper even had one story bylined in Tskhinvali. The paper would also often have multiple journalists contributing to one story, so one story could be bylined in five different locations. There were, however, more news pieces bylined in Georgia than in Russia; out of 30 stories classified as news or news analysis, 22 were contributed, at least partly, by journalists in Georgia, and only five by journalists in Russia.

Novaya Gazeta: Geographical locations 2008

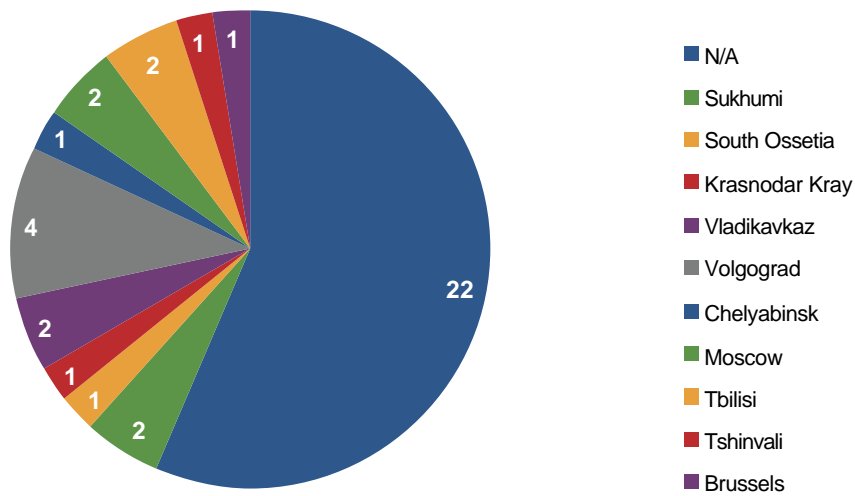


Figure 15

N=39 stories

Novaya gazeta failed to indicate the geography of most of its news pieces. The paper clearly had no resources to send its staff reporters around Russia and Georgia; however, it had freelance contributors in many Russian cities, such as Volgograd, Chelyabinsk and Vladikavkaz. The paper would report the efforts of these regions to accommodate refugees from South Ossetia. *Novaya gazeta* also had a staff journalist working in South Ossetia during the war. Russian journalists had no problems with gaining access to South Ossetia, unlike their colleagues in the West.

Süddeutsche Zeitung: Geographical locations 2008

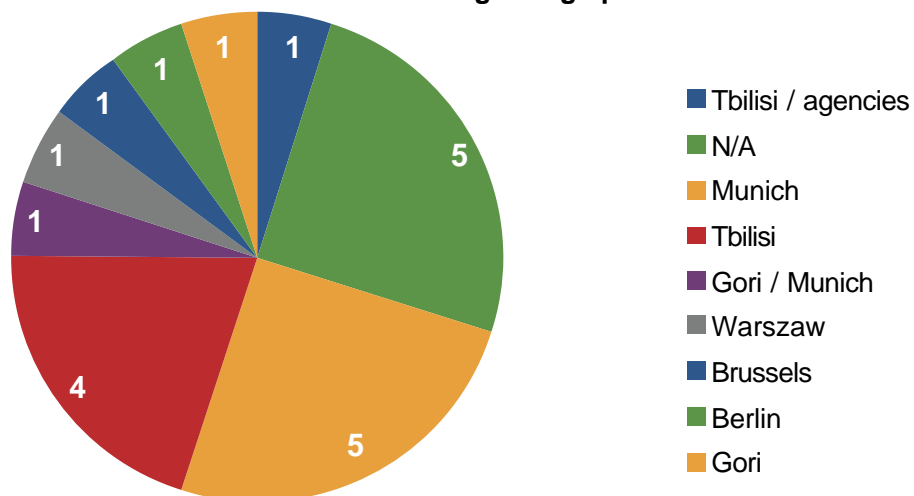


Figure 16

N=20 stories

Süddeutsche Zeitung reported the August 2008 war from Georgia and Western cities. The paper's Moscow correspondent was apparently sent to Tbilisi to cover the war, so the paper had nobody reporting from Russia at that time.

6.1.2. The Geography of the News in 2004 and 2006

In 2004 and 2006, the journalists had clearly less chance to travel. In the summer of 2004, for example, *The Guardian* had three stories bylined in Moscow, but the stories coming from Tbilisi and Tskhinval/i were all by news agencies.

The New York Times had one story bylined in Abkhazia and another “on a patrol boat on the Black Sea”. All of the other stories were either from news agencies or written in the US. Similarly, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had stories coming from its Moscow correspondent, but those coming from Tbilisi were all agency material, with one exception. *Novaya gazeta* indicated geographical location in only two of the stories analyzed in 2004 – one feature was written between Tbilisi and Tskhinval/i, and another was bylined in South Ossetia.

The situation was quite similar in 2006. *The Guardian*, however, had three comment stories from the Caucasus written by its correspondent who happened to have been running a training programme there. There was also one feature story written in Georgia. *The New York Times* had one story bylined in Batumi, two in Moscow, one in Abkhazia and one in Belgrad. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had again stories filed by its Moscow correspondent, and the only story that was bylined in Tbilisi came from an agency. *Novaya gazeta*'s 2004 stories were mostly written in Moscow, except for one feature bylined “Moscow-Nalchik” and two stories bylined in Tbilisi.

6.2. The Geography of the News: the Empirical Results

During the escalations of the conflict in 2004 and 2006, most of the studied newspapers relied on their Moscow staff to write stories about Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During the 2006 escalation, only *The New York Times* had a journalist covering events around Abkhazia. In 2004, only *Novaya gazeta* sent a correspondent to South Ossetia. It was only by coincidence, such as in the case of *The Guardian* in 2006, that one of its reporters had been invited to run a series of workshops in the

Caucasus, and so was present on the ground. The picture was quite different in 2008. Those papers that had the resources to report from multiple locations – in this case, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* – had journalists reporting in Russia, Georgia and numerous locations in the West. This illustrates the importance of the August 2008 war compared to the previous, smaller conflicts.

6.3 “Voices” of the News - Who gets to Speak on behalf of Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

Access to news is a good indicator of whom the journalists perceived to be important and “eligible” to speak on behalf of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As claimed by the Glasgow Media Group³⁶ and many other critical researchers, access to news is given mainly to the powerful. Through this access, a small minority of powerful people are able to define and frame reality, according to their interests.

It is fair to say that powerful people and elites are newsworthy because of their decision-making position in society. Elites always make the news. However, in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, talking to non-elites would have demonstrated to the journalists a surprisingly little-known fact: that the current populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are almost entirely against joining Georgia.³⁷

My interest was in seeing what voices appear in the stories about Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who are the active participants in the stories analyzed and whose point of view comes through in the stories.

By “voices” I mean any mention of a certain actor in a story. That can mean “Russian authorities claim” or “Western newspapers report”, or it can mean a direct quote from a certain source, as long as the actor can be classified as being active and clearly credited in the story. Also, if a newspaper is quoting a Russian (state-owned) news agency, that quotes a South Ossetian official, I have counted this as both a “Russian official” and an “SO official”.

Newspapers, news agencies, etc. are counted as official voices; however, NGO workers and other groups that are unaffiliated to any of the states are counted as

³⁶ See, for instance: the Glasgow University Media Group: *Really Bad News*. London, Writers & Readers, 1982, pp 113-126.

³⁷ When presenting my research at the Reuters Institute to an audience consisting of senior journalists from all corners of the world, many of them commented that they were surprised to hear that the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would not live with Georgians. They said that they never received this information from anywhere before.

“people”. “Western” voices means, in most cases, politicians or the Western press. There were very few references to anything that could have been classified as “Western people”; this is why I combine all “Western voices” into one category.

Pictures 17, 18 and 19 indicate the voices that appeared in the newspapers in 2008, 2004 and 2006, respectively. The figures indicate the percentages of total stories.

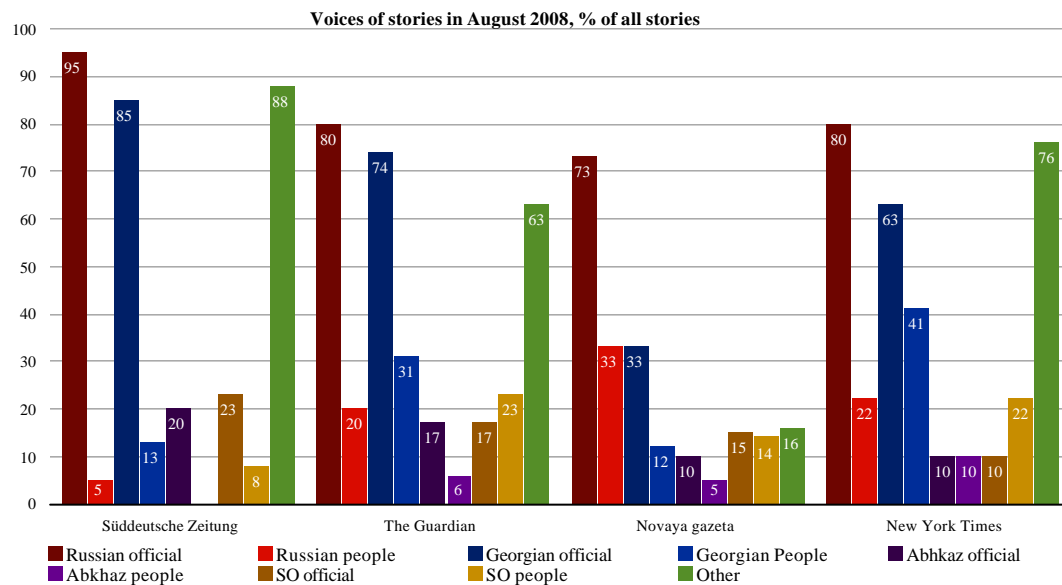


Figure 17 *Süddeutsche Zeitung* N=40 stories, *The Guardian* N=35 stories, *Novaya gazeta* N=58 stories, *The New York Times* N=42 stories

In August 2008, Russian official, Georgian official and “Western” official voices prevailed in all of the papers. The former was the biggest category in all the papers; Russian politicians, generals or the state media were quoted in nearly every story. In *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Western politicians and experts were given almost as much space as their Russian counterparts. *Novaya gazeta* quoted Georgian officials far less often than Russians – actually, the ordinary Russian people (ordinary soldiers, the people on the street) got to talk as often as the Georgian officials.

The smallest category everywhere was “ordinary people”; however, ordinary South Ossetians did appear in all of the newspapers, at least every now and then.

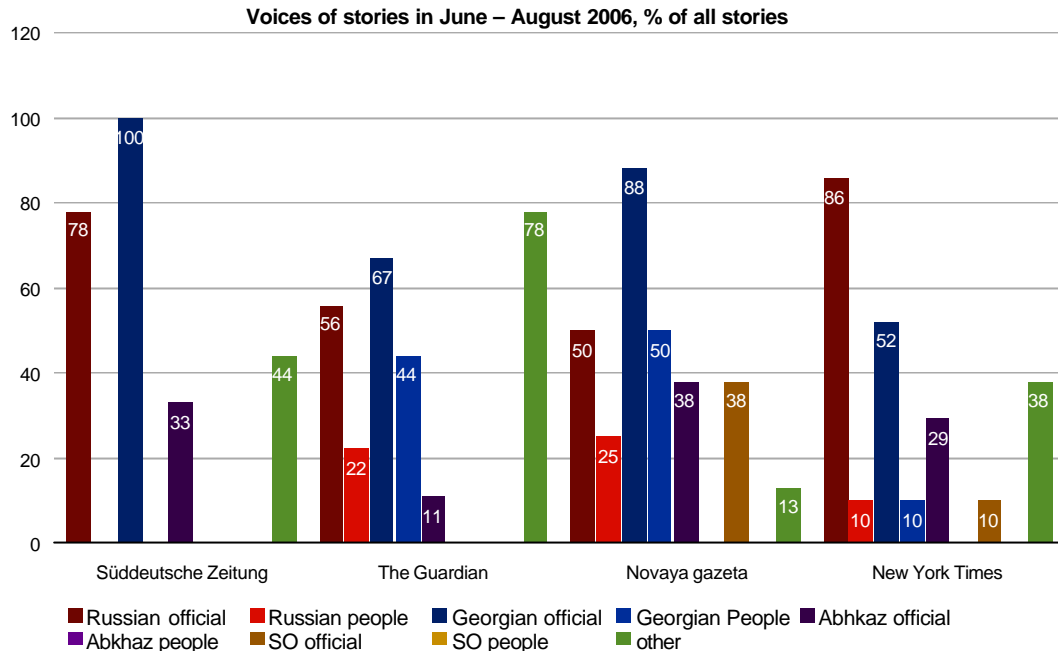


Figure 18 *Süddeutsche Zeitung* N=9 stories, *The Guardian* N=9 stories, *Novaya gazeta* N=8 stories, *The New York Times* N=21 stories

In 2006, the picture is similar, in that the Russian and Georgian officials were given the most room in the papers. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for example, did not quote the ordinary people at all. The Abkhaz officials, however, appeared in 33% of the stories. Abkhaz officials appeared in all of the other papers as well, but South Ossetians appeared very seldom. Only *Novaya gazeta* would quote South Ossetian officials about the Kodori crisis.

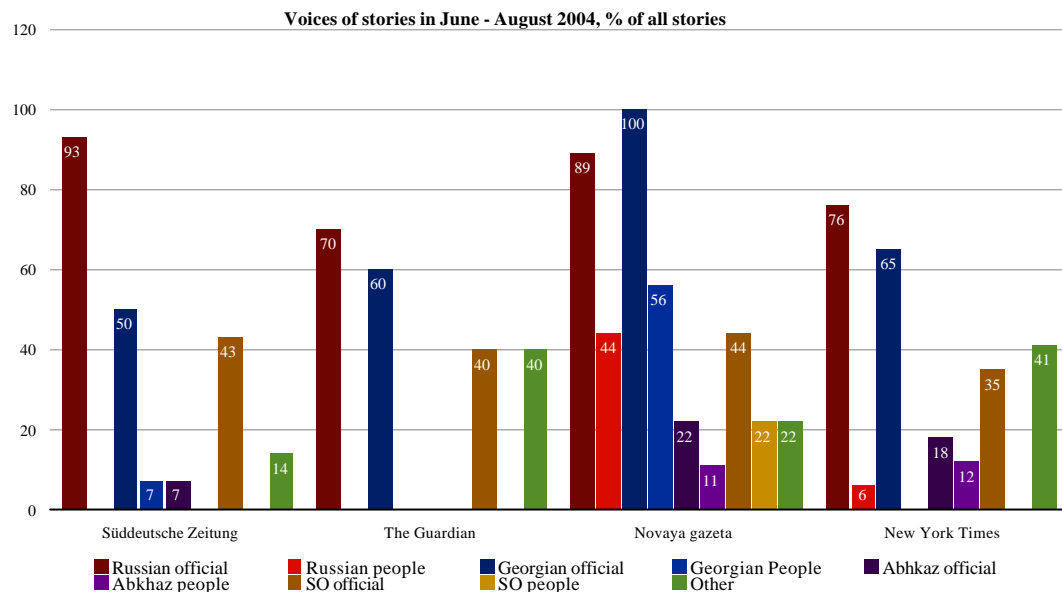


Figure 19 *Süddeutsche Zeitung* N=14 stories, *The Guardian* N=10 stories, *Novaya gazeta* N=9 stories, *The New York Times* N=17 stories

In 2004, the trends are similar: the official Russian and Georgian voices prevail and ordinary people appear in the papers very seldom. *Novaya gazeta* has the greatest multitude of voices, but, for instance, *The Guardian* has no ordinary people's voices at all. South Ossetian officials, however, appear in all the papers, from 35% of the stories in *The New York Times* to 44% of stories in *Novaya gazeta*. Even though the Georgian officials appear far more often, at least the South Ossetians are given a chance to express their views about the summer 2004 conflict.

6.4. Where, Who and What – Does Geography explain Voices?

Even though the vast majority of classified stories are news, a glance at the other categories provides an interesting outlook at the reporting, especially if examine where the journalists were located and what sources they were using.

6.4.1. *Novaya gazeta*

Novaya gazeta's reportage during the August war was largely affected by where the newspaper had journalists, even though the majority of the stories were not bylined

anywhere. A large proportion of the short news pieces came from the regions of Russia, and these relied heavily on official Russian sources.

When it came to feature stories, the picture was different. The newspaper's military correspondent, for instance, travelled to South Ossetia with a Russian military convoy on 13 August. The correspondent describes vividly how he hid in potholes with the soldiers, trying to help the wounded.

Novaya gazeta clearly rolled its sleeves up when the war started. On August 9-10, the tone of the stories is far more dry and official, but already, from August 10 onwards, *Novaya Gazeta* is able to offer a multitude of voices from both sides, having a correspondent also in Tbilisi. The paper also produces features and news analysis by war commentators, columnists and Brussels correspondents. *Novaya gazeta* also follows the blogosphere, which partly explains the high percentage of "Russian people's voices" in the stories. The paper also published an open letter to the Parliamentary assembly of the European Council, to the European Parliament, European Commission as well as the OSCE, demanding that the organizations urgently get organized in order to define who was responsible for the outbreak of the war in South Ossetia, and who was responsible for the deaths of the civilians as well as the crimes against humanity.

Novaya gazeta also pays attention to the second, less famous, front of this war: that opened by Abkhaz forces in the Kodori gorge. On August 13, *Novaya gazeta's* correspondent, Yevgenii Titov, travelled to Kodori, preparing a report on the journey, despite the fact that the Russian military authorities refused the journalist of *Novaya gazeta* an accreditation to go to Kodori. According to Titov's story, the Russian (State) TV received their accreditation "with hoorays". Titov's story concentrates on his conversations with Abkhaz volunteers, and, to a lesser extent, the statements of the Russian and Abkhaz *de facto* authorities.

Novaya gazeta's reportage during the first days of the war is, in a sense, controversial. On the other hand, the paper uses widely the Russian agencies and Russian media sources, which report the war almost entirely from the Russian point of view.

It can be said that *Novaya gazeta's* reportage of the August 2008 war is the most interesting and multi-faceted of all the papers, though the paper does not even try to maintain objectivity. The journalists of the paper knew a lot about the background to the conflicts, and were very explicit about how they used their sources and from

where they got their information. The paper had good access to both sides of the conflict, and was also able to use its large network of correspondents all over Russia.

6.4.2. *The New York Times*

In *The New York Times*, over 80% of the stories in August 2008 were classified as either news or news analysis. The news was bylined in numerous locations, stretching from Las Vegas to Gori and Vladikavkaz. Both Russia and Georgia were represented in the news, and many of the stories were bylined in numerous locations. Did this make the coverage balanced?

At first glance, the answer is yes. For instance, on August 12, *The New York Times* published a major story about the refugees displaced after this war, and the previous one. On the same day, two other journalists reported the plight of civilians in Tskhinvali, quoting them as well as the official Russian sources.

In general, *The New York Times*' reportage tells the story of an internationalized conflict. In most cases, *The New York Times* uses multiple sources. Nearly every story, excluding those depicting the plight of civilians, quotes Russian officials

However, the journalists talked to ordinary Georgians twice as often as to ordinary Russians. The tone of reportage in Georgia was also often more sympathetic. For instance, when covering a demonstration against the war by the pro-Kremlin youth group, "Young Russia", *The New York Times* headlined the story "*Russians confident that Nation is Back*",³⁸ but, when covering a gathering of Georgians in New York, the headline was, "*In Brooklyn, Georgians Pray and Frantically Call Families*".³⁹ The difference is evident: self-confident, even aggressive young Muscovites versus peace-loving, religious Georgians. On the other hand, *The New York Times* showed a great deal of sympathy for the plight of the South Ossetian refugees in Vladikavkaz.⁴⁰

6.4.3. *The Guardian*

Quite similar to *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*'s news stories were bylined in multiple locations, from London and Brussels to Vladikavkaz, Gori, Tbilisi and

³⁸ August 14 2008.

³⁹ August 10 2008

⁴⁰ The August 10 story from Vladikavkaz was headlined "*Shattered from Strife, Families Try to Rebuild*".

Moscow. Stories other than news did not indicate any geographical location apart from a large feature in the weekly supplement of *The Guardian* about the unrecognized states. The author of the story had visited both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The multiple geographical locations of the journalists, however, does not mean a greater diversity of voices. The Russian and Georgian official voices had the opportunity to talk most often, followed by Western officials and the Georgian people, who appear in just over 30% of the stories. The paper's correspondent in Tbilisi was eager to talk to ordinary people and listen to their views about the war. The Russian people appeared as well, but to a lesser extent. The paper, however, did publish eyewitness accounts by refugees who had fled Tskhinval/i for Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia.

The reportage on during August 12 is an interesting example of how *The Guardian* tries to create a balance. The paper published a large piece on the Russian invasion of mainland Georgia. There were eyewitness accounts from the bombed city of Gori, noting the "unproportional" degree of the Russian response. However, on the same page, the paper's correspondent in North Ossetia wrote about the plight of Ossetian families there. The editorial of that very same day described the two contradicting narratives of the war, the Georgian and Russian ones: the Russian version is all about stopping the genocide, whereas Mikheil Saakashvili kept repeating that it was not about Georgia, but about democracy in Russia's neighbourhood. It is clear that *The Guardian* aimed to create a balanced picture. The paper had the advantage of having correspondents in both Gori and Vladikavkaz, even though access to South Ossetia was clearly restricted

6.4.4. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

Almost 70% of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s stories in August 2008 are classified as foreign news or news analysis. Analytical stories were bylined either in Munich, Warsaw or Washington, but there was more geographical variation in stories classified as news. Seven stories out of nineteen are bylined in Georgia, but there is no single story bylined in Moscow or anywhere else in Russia, because the paper's Moscow correspondent, Sonja Zekri, was apparently sent to Georgia as soon as the conflict broke out. Despite this, 95% of the stories – a higher percentage than any of

the other papers – used Russian official sources. Most often, these constituted harsh-sounding quotes from high-profile Russian politicians or diplomats. Georgian official sources come third after Western ones. Surprisingly, despite the paper having a correspondent in Georgia, the number of Georgian people's voices is very low.

The paper could not completely avoid sounding sympathetic towards Georgia, especially during the first days of the conflict. The Russian official voices were used to strengthen this impression. The editorials and commentaries were relatively pro-Georgian during the first days of the war. However, as the five-day war continued, the paper tried to analyze the reasons for it, while refraining from blaming either side.

Editorials and comment pieces continued to place greater blame on Russia. It seems as if *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* armchair commentators were quite certain about Russia being the guilty party; however, the reporters on the ground saw the complexity of the situation. For instance, on August 14, the paper's first page quoted German diplomats as saying that Russia should not be condemned too hastily, since the reasons for the war were more complicated than that. In a page-long story about Mikheil Saakashvili, *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* correspondent in Tbilisi takes a profound look at the (sinking) popularity of the President, the mistakes made and the state of democracy in Georgia. The paper also published a commentary, in which the journalist strongly criticizes the outcome of the war, stating that Europe demonstrated weakness and an inability to stand firm behind its decisions.

It can be said that *Süddeutsche Zeitung* aimed at balanced reporting; however, the variations between the individual reporters was considerable. The paper had its own staff correspondent in Georgia for the whole period. However, unlike *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has nobody in South Ossetia/North Ossetia, so the paper has to rely on second-hand sources when reporting the situation there. The editorials are more often critical towards Russia, and the familiar discourses about "the return of the cold war" appear there regularly.

In this sense, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* aims at being the "voice of Europe" against the great unknown, giving a lot of space to European diplomats. This often happens at the expense of other sources. Apart from the Russian official voices, there is very little diversity in *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* voices from the other side of the conflict. The paper's heavy reliance on official sources gives its reporting a framework, in which the war is less about South Ossetia, and more about the European diplomats' struggles

to shape their relationship with Russia with its imperialistic ambitions, on the one hand, and with heroic but unpredictable Georgia, on the other.

6.5. Geography, voices and categories in 2004 and 2006

In both 2004 and 2006, Abkhazia and South Ossetia appeared not only in the news but also in other kinds of stories as well. Despite the escalations, the conflicts were not the only framework within which the regions appeared in the newspapers. For instance, *Novaya gazeta* reports conflicts in big reportage-like stories. Few stories indicated their geographical location, but those that did are very long and detailed. In the summer of 2004, for example, when a conflict broke out in South Ossetia after the closure of the Ergneti bazaar in South Ossetia, *Novaya gazeta* reported the situation in great detail. The newspaper's best-known reporter, the late Anna Politkovskaya, travelled to South Ossetia in the summer of 2004. Her reporting is very detailed and subjective – and quite sympathetic towards Georgia. She even writes about the South Ossetians targeting Georgians with grenade launchers, and, when his Georgian interviewee revealed that they did not return the fire, she wrote that “he looks sincere”. In 2004 and 2006, the paper also covers issues like officers being sacked from the Russian Army, interviews Georgian politicians and writers, investigates the connections between Al-Qaeda and the Kabardino-Balkarian autonomous republic in the Russian North Caucasus, and so on. The emphasis is not on news but features, analysis and human interest.

6.5.1. *The New York Times*

The New York Times published several large feature stories highlighting the problems of the breakaway territories of Georgia during summer 2004. The newspaper's journalists visited both Abkhazia and the West coast of Georgia, as the shadow of a possible war lingered over the region. Abkhazia also appears in three other feature stories; one of them being a review of a cookbook, another a feature comparing the leadership qualities of two infamous tyrants, Saddam Hussein and Iosif Stalin; and the third being a story about the deepest caves in the world (the very deepest, according to the story, being a cave in Abkhazia). Interestingly enough, in these stories, the authors

feel no need to explain what and where Abkhazia is. The conflict in South Ossetia itself is most frequently covered in shorter news reports.

In 2006, Abkhazia and South Ossetia often appear in *The New York Times*' digest of the Russian press. Issues such as Senator John McCain's visit to Georgia and, respectively, South Ossetia, are reported as a part of this press digest. Few of the stories are bylined anywhere outside the US; however, there is one news item bylined in Batumi, two in Moscow, and one feature bylined in Abkhazia and another in Belgrad. The Georgian official voices prevail.

When it comes to the sources/voices in the news, *The New York Times* uses multiple sources, almost without exception. There are very few stories, one during each summer, where only Russian sources were used, compared to two stories in 2004 and 3 stories in 2006 in which only Georgian voices were heard.

6.5.2. *The Guardian*

The Guardian had the fewest voices of all in 2004, when it only referred to official voices. Most of the stories are classified as news, and the majority of the news came from agencies, though it was bylined in Tskhinval/i, Tbilisi and Moscow. Only stories from Moscow were written by the paper's own staff. The paper did report the increasing tensions in South Ossetia, often using Associated Press or Moscow correspondents as its main source rather than sending reporters down to Georgia or South Ossetia. Abkhazia appears in the paper's "web watch" story as an example of a country that can be found through a particular country-specific search engine. It is interesting to note how Abkhazia can appear as a "country" in a non-political context. On August 30 2004, *The Guardian* published a background piece on the conflict in South Ossetia, formed as a question and answer session and using other papers as its sources. Earlier the same month, the newspaper had regularly reported on the course of the incidents in South Ossetia, however it often relied on AP rather than its own correspondents. In early August, the paper reported the warnings of Mikheil Saakashvili to Russian tourists holidaying in Abkhazia, as well as Russia's reactions to these.

In the summer of 2006, *The Guardian* has a columnist based in the Caucasus, who was running training programmes for NGOs for a few months. He did not report the news events in the area, but concentrated on discussing the different concepts and

areas of international law, putting them in a loose Caucasus context. In June 2006, the paper published a feature following the recognition of the independence of Montenegro. In this story, the reporter visited Abkhazia and talked to the *de facto* officials there. In July 2006, the paper published a human interest story about a British charity that was making small loans to displaced people in Georgia. Also, in July of the same year, Abkhazia appears in two stories related to the death of one of the most notorious Chechen militants, Shamil Basayev, who fought in the war in Abkhazia.

6.5.3. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

Süddeutsche Zeitung mentions Abkhazia and South Ossetia mostly in its news both in 2004 and 2006, although it did not send a correspondent to Tbilisi but used news agency materials or a Moscow correspondent. In the summer of 2006, the paper followed the situation in the Kodori gorge in its news. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote about the deterioration of relations between Georgia and Russia, and published one large story about Kosovo and its possible consequences for the other breakaway territories of Europe.

The overall tone of the stories is balanced, and, although Russian sources are used in 100% of the stories, Abkhazian and Georgian voices do appear as well.

In the summer of 2004, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published regular small news pieces about South Ossetia and Georgia. It is remarkable, that there is only one story in which the situation is commented on by a Western expert. The category “other” means largely international agencies, that are often used by the paper; however, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* also published stories bylined by its own reporters. The tone of these stories was very moderate, and the paper aimed to explain the position of all three sides. Mikheil Saakashvili was called “an imperialist on his own land”, and the *de facto* leader of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoity, is quoted in several stories.

Süddeutsche Zeitung’s reportage is far more neutral and dispassionate in 2004 and 2006, than in 2008.

How does geography explain voices?

Quite self-evidently, having a journalist on the ground means more voices and also more emphasis on the otherwise neglected voices of the ordinary people, NGO representatives, local experts, and so on. Even so, my materials show that the

hierarchy of the importance of the sources remains unchanged. Local, non-elite sources are there to spice up the stories and the important quotes come from officials. News agency materials and sources are used selectively to emphasise certain aspects of the story. This could be called balance, but sometimes it leads to distortions :

“Impartiality is not balance, it is not objectivity; it means looking for those aspects of a story that are important and remarkable”

commented a BBC journalist at a Reuters Institute seminar in June 2009.

But whose job is it to define what is important and remarkable, and for whom?

7. The Language of News about Abkhazia and South Ossetia

This chapter examines certain patterns of reporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I explore both the propaganda efforts by both sides, and also certain of the stereotypical depictions of these little-known regions that might or might not arise in the stories.

To analyze the former, I examine how the following words or metaphors appeared in the stories:

- “The Return of the Cold War”
- “Aggression”
- “Democracy”

I also analyzed how the journalists approached the following:

- Comparisons with other conflicts (Afghanistan, Iraq, Czechoslovakia in 1969, Chechnya...)
- Russian propaganda about the 2000 killed in the early days of the 2008 conflict
- Depictions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – separatists or oppressed regions fighting for freedom?

By classifying the stories along these lines, I attempted to determine:

- 1) whether the reporting has been balanced or biased (pro-Georgian vs pro-Russian?)
- 2) whether the propaganda efforts of both sides appeared in the pages of the papers and whether the journalists had the time and opportunity to check the facts

- 3) whether the journalists put any effort into trying to analyze and understand these complicated conflicts or whether the reportage followed the discourse dominated by war propaganda – ‘good guys vs bad guys’?

The reasons why I chose these words and/or concepts are explained at the beginning of each subchapter.

7.1. Return of the Cold War

During the first days of the war, both journalists and politicians were fast to draw the conclusion that the Cold War was back.⁴¹ If you put the situation into a single black-and-white frame, it indeed looked interesting. Russia, isolated and alone ever since the recognition of Kosovo earlier that year, decided to take advantage of the situation and ruthlessly attacked its small neighbour. Georgia, a small, proud democracy, was squeezed between the interests of the West and East – like so many small countries during the decades following the Second World War. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of Russia also mentioned the “Cold War mentality of the West”; many journalists chose to quote him, and take the comparison further:

*“The Cold War rhetoric was such lazy journalism. When I heard comparisons with Prague in 1969, I started pulling my hair out!”*⁴²

This discourse was developed by the Georgian authorities well before the war broke out. As one Georgian journalist told a researcher in November 2008:

“One night, me and my wife were sitting watching television and we turned on the public broadcaster. And it was three weeks before the war started and there was a documentary and it was a newly-made documentary by the public broadcaster telling us how patriotic and how strong the Finnish people were when they resisted Stalin’s Soviet aggression and how they fought and how... and it was maybe an hour-long documentary or so. And I told my wife, something bad is going to happen here, definitely, very soon. And then my wife was telling me it was because it was that propaganda, including the free media, was really preparing this public opinion for this kind of thing. And when I watched that programme, it was just normal, nothing special. But it

⁴¹ See, for example Gemma Pörzgen: Deutungskonflikt. “Osteuropa”, 58, 11/2008, pp 79-95.

⁴² Interview with Alastair Burnett, editor of the BBC’s “World Tonight”, December 11 2008.

*was preceded by video clips, music videos, with a Georgian singer singing patriotic songs...”*⁴³

I remember that, already in 2007, Georgian TV often played a music video based on an old Georgian-language song, “*Gamarjobat Abkhazeti tu sheni*” (“How are you, my Abkhazia?”) The song itself was a beautiful ballad, relating how a person missed his home, beautiful Abkhazia. The music video for it, however, could only be described as propagandistic: people waving Georgian, and only Georgian, flags, returning to Abkhazia. The song was sung by Georgian celebrities, including actors famous everywhere in the former Soviet Union, Vakhtang Kikabidze and Nani Bregvadze, both currently living in Moscow. The process of persuading people to believe that war – a justified one from the Georgian viewpoint – was in the air had started months before the actual fighting erupted.

This chapter aims to examine how the newspapers reacted to the lingering Cold War metaphors, and how often they ended up using them.

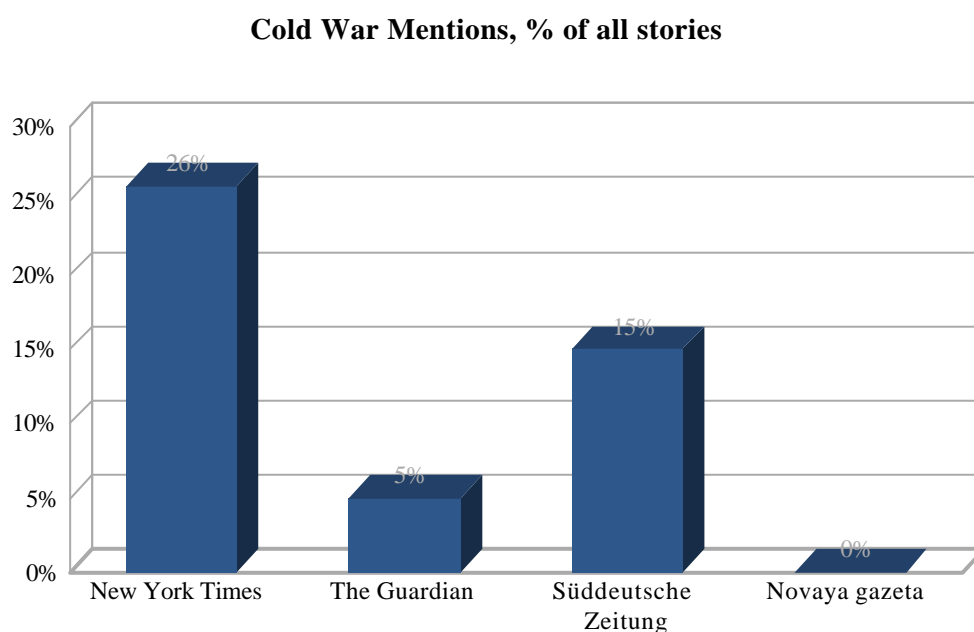


Figure 20 *The New York Times* N=42 stories, *The Guardian* N=35 stories, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* N=40 stories, *Novaya gazeta* N=58 stories

Figure 20 demonstrates that the papers, apart from *The New York Times*, did not refer to the Cold War very often. *Novaya gazeta* did not mention it at all during August 2008.

⁴³ Inka Salovaara-Moring: Conflict in Georgia: Nation, Media and Borderland Politics. Working paper for Aleksanteri instituutti, University of Helsinki, Finland, December 2008

The Guardian mentioned the Cold War in 9% of its stories, that is five times. One case was an opinion column, in which the author criticized the Western experts' enthusiasm for drawing Cold War conclusions. However, in this story, the author mentioned the "Cold War" three times. The second story was an editorial, that indeed recalled that:

"this conflict has reopened the scars of the Cold War" (*The Guardian* 15.8.).

The phrase "Cold War" appeared also in a news analysis, where the author states that:

"It is the first time the Russians have wielded their guns in anger beyond Russia's borders since the Soviet collapse and the end of the Cold War"
(*The Guardian* 12.8.).

Süddeutsche Zeitung mentioned the Cold War in 15% of its stories. These were either quotations – the paper quoted Vladimir Putin talking about the "Cold War mentality" of the west as well as Senator John McCain talking about the Cold War – or appeared in editorial columns. The language of the editorials was more courageous. One of the stories compares the situation, *"not with the Cold War, but rather with the situation between the wars in 1939"*, or: *"As during the times of Cold War, when Russia exercised rigid isolation politics, now it's the time for the researchers of the Kremlin"*.

The line of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* seems like a careful admittance that the Cold War times might be back – largely thanks to Russia.

Figure 21 takes a closer look at how the phrase "Cold War" was framed in *The New York Times*.

Framing of Cold War in New York Times, % of all stories mentioning Cold War

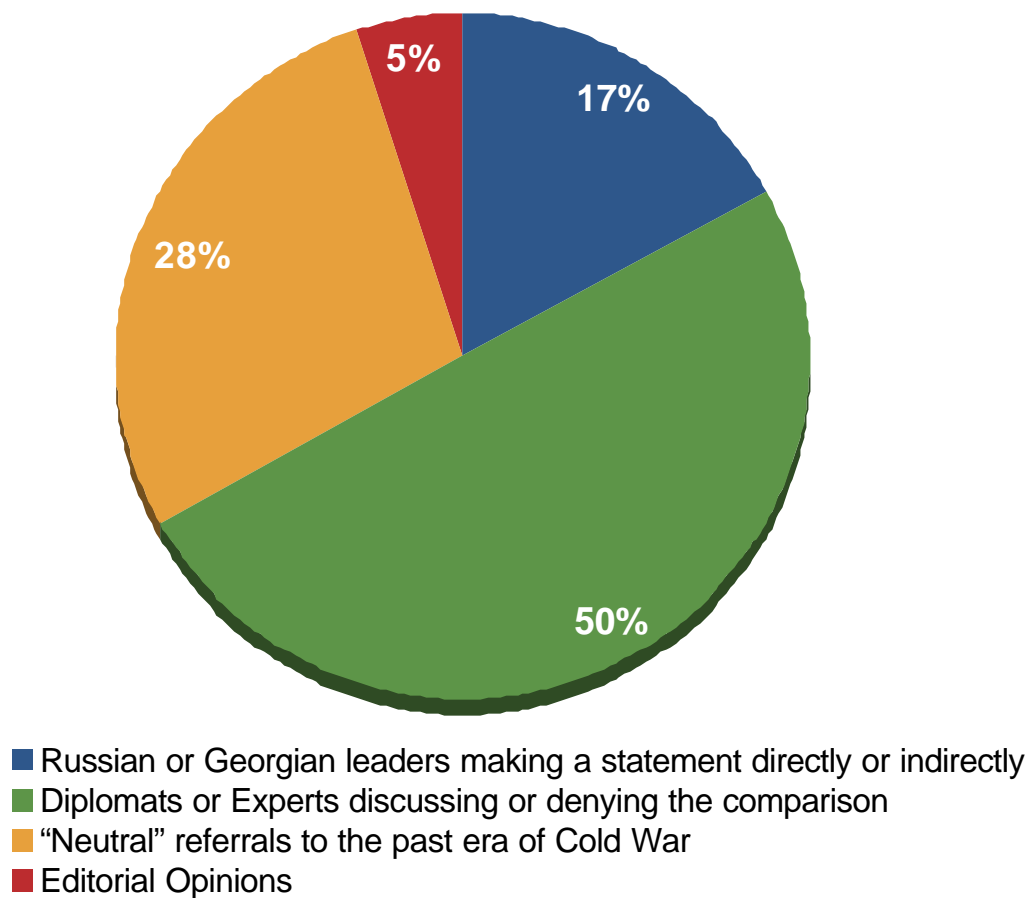


Figure 21

N= 17 mentions

In most cases, *The New York Times* quotes diplomats or experts (both Western and Russian) discussing or denying the comparison:

“Mr. Gates stressed that he was not predicting a return to the Cold War, and he said that over all the United States response to the crisis had been restrained” (15 August. 2008).

“Russia is in an extremely dangerous situation”,trapped between the obligation to protect Russian citizens and the risk of escalating into ‘a new Cold War’ with the United States, Dr. Markov said (11 August 2008.).

Sometimes, the journalist would simply frame this story by referring very loosely to the community of diplomats and experts, stating that the return of the Cold War is practically a self-evident fact:

“For much of the diplomatic and policy-making world, the border where Georgia faces Russia, with South Ossetia and Abkhazia between them, has become a new Cold War frontier” (9 August 2008)).

Other ways of discussing the Cold War in *The New York Times* were “neutral” referrals to the past era of the Cold War; for example:

“The escalation of fighting raised tensions between Russia and its former Cold War foes to their highest level in decades” (10 August.2008).

“But global politics have breathed new life into the conflict, making it a flash point for the resurgent tensions between the former Cold War rivals” (8 August.2008).

“But, in signing up to an accord, Russia appears to have stopped short of a full-scale invasion that would have set off a broader, Cold War-style confrontation with the West” (14 August.2008).

Here, the “Cold War” appears as a historic fact.

The Russian and Georgian leaders would also make statements about the Cold War, directly or indirectly, such as:

“The Cold War has long ended but the mentality of the Cold War has stayed firmly in the minds of several U.S. diplomats,” Mr. Putin said. (11 August 2008)

The latest category, editorial statements, includes only one story, that states

“Of course NATO is no longer an anti-Soviet alliance, and the fact that Russia views NATO’s eastward expansion as a threat to its security is a vivid sign of the deep-rooted Cold War mentality of Mr. Putin and his circle.”(9 August 2008))

It is clear that *The New York Times* is very careful in not taking an explicit position by referring to the events as a return of the Cold War. The paper leaves the job to the experts and diplomats.

7.1.2. The Cold War in 2004-06

None of the papers mentioned the “Cold War” at all in their stories during the summers of 2004 and 2006.

7.1.3. Empirical Results for Subchapter 7.1

The appearance of the term “Cold War” in the pages of the papers during the conflict of 2008 shows clearly that the appearance of Russia as a party of the conflict made the reminders of the Cold War realities appealing to the journalists. However, the journalists did this mostly by carefully following the statements of the leaders of both Georgia and Russia, as well as the Western politicians.

The New York Times was exceptional in its use of Cold War comparisons. The term ‘Cold War’ appeared in the newspaper as one of the important framing issues. Both the Russian and Georgian leaders blame each other for the “Cold War mentality”, but, in the end, the paper concludes that it is Putin and his circle whose mentality dates back to the years of the Cold War.

7.2. History Repeating Itself: From Prague 1968 to Iraq

A young British journalist, Ben Judah, spent a month at the office of the National Security Council of Georgia from October 2008. He wanted to see how the news was made. He came to realize that there was an interest in history:

*“They really loved comparisons with history. I tried to explain to them that, if they say that Putin is Hitler and Georgia is Sudetenland, they would lose their credibility...”*⁴⁴

Judah witnessed the National Security Council consultants reading books about the Second World War. According to Judah, everybody seemed to believe in the “Edward Lucas kind of interpretation of history”.⁴⁵

During the conflict, the Russian side did not ignore the previous wars either, concentrating on the American-led wars of recent years. In August 2008, I was in Russia and witnessed Russian TV channels constantly returning to the NATO bombings of Serbia in 1999. The news from South Ossetia often started with an archive piece about the burning buildings of Belgrade. Another point of reference was Iraq: for the Russian propaganda machine, the US- and British-led invasion of

⁴⁴ Interview with Ben Judah, April 16th, 2009.

⁴⁵ Edward Lucas is the author of “*New Cold War*”.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq acted as further proof of how international law is ignored by the US and its allies.

This chapter examines how much of this ended up on the pages of the papers, and how it was framed.

7.2.1. Afghanistan 1979 and 2008

On August 12 2008, Brian Whitmore wrote in *Asia Times Online*:

*“In an effort to prod the West towards Tbilisi's side in its rapidly escalating armed conflict with Russia, the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, is invoking the ghosts of Cold War battles past - Moscow's suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan in 1979”.*⁴⁶

I explored whether the journalists would repeat Saakashvili's line on Afghanistan, and how it was framed.

Table 1: Afghanistan in the press in August 2008

Afghanistan	% of stories	Framing: “Soviet invasion”; times that Afghanistan is mentioned	Framing “ongoing conflict”
<i>The New York Times</i> 2008	21	54	45
<i>Novaya gazeta</i> 2008	3	0	100
<i>The Guardian</i> 2008	6	0	100
<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i> 2008	5	0	100

⁴⁶ Brian Whitmore: *Saakashvili Overplays His Hand*. *Asia Times Online*. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/JH12Ag01.html.

As shown in Table 1, *The New York Times* wrote about Afghanistan most often, in 21 percent of its stories in August 2008. In over half of the cases, *The New York Times* reminded its readers about the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan. *The Guardian* in August 2008 mentioned Afghanistan twice, both times within the framework of ongoing conflict. There were no mentions of the Soviet invasion of the country.

Novaya gazeta mentioned Afghanistan twice, constituting 3 percent of the stories. On both occasions, Afghanistan was mentioned as part of the ongoing military conflict and the West's role there.

Süddeutsche Zeitung mentioned Afghanistan only once during the first week of the August 2008 war, in a quotation by Russia's Ambassador to the UN, Vitalii Tshurkin, who criticized US interference in Afghanistan and Iraq.

7.2.2 Afghanistan in 2004 and 2006

Afghanistan rarely appeared in the papers during 2004 and 2006. Only in *The New York Times* in 2006 was there one story in which Afghanistan was mentioned, in the framework of the NATO enlargement. Afghanistan did not appear in other papers during 2004 and 2006.

7.2.3. Iraq

The American military operation in Iraq was another issue that was often criticized by Russia. Not without good reason; when George Bush criticized Russia for invading a sovereign country, it was not difficult for Russians to find parallels in Bush's own military undertakings. It is true that the US- and UK-led operation in Iraq sparked a huge international debate, splitting the UN security council and inspiring the UN Secretary-General to speak of a "*moment maybe no less decisive than 1945 itself, when the UN was founded*".⁴⁷

Another reason, why Iraq was interesting was the fact that Georgia had sent 2000 troops into the country. Once the conflict started, Georgia planned to bring at least half of its soldiers home to fight in South Ossetia.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Christine Gray: *International Law and the Use of Force*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2008, p. 3.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4495242.ece>.

Figures 22 to 26 show how often Iraq appeared in each paper in 2008, 2006 and 2004 respectively, and how it was framed.

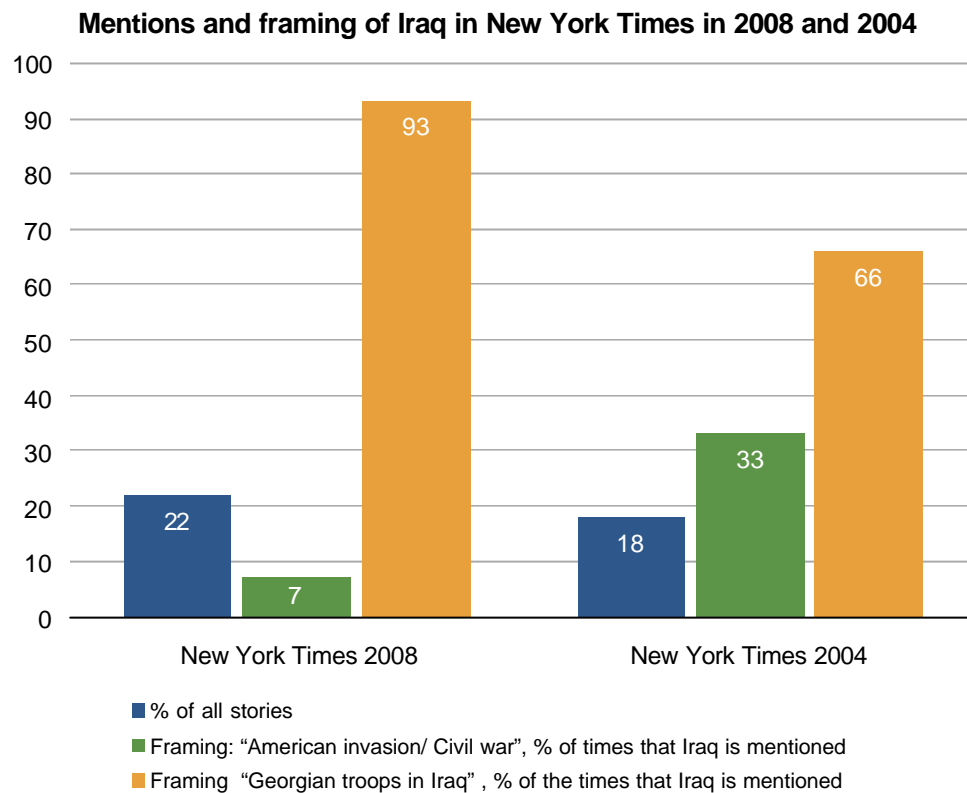


Figure 22 N=42 stories in 2008 (N=9 stories mentioning Iraq), N=17 stories in 2004 (N=3 stories mentioning Iraq)

The New York Times mentioned Iraq in 21% of its stories in August 2008, and in some of the stories it was mentioned up to four times. There is only one story in which "Iraq" appears in the American context, without mentioning the fact that Georgia participated in the operation. The Iraq war appeared in a neutral context, without criticism.

Iraq was not mentioned in *The New York Times* in 2006 at all. In 2004, the paper mentioned Iraq in 18% of its stories. In most of the cases (66%), again, Iraq was mentioned in relation to the fact that Georgia deployed forces to the country. A third of the stories referred to Iraq from the American invasion viewpoint.

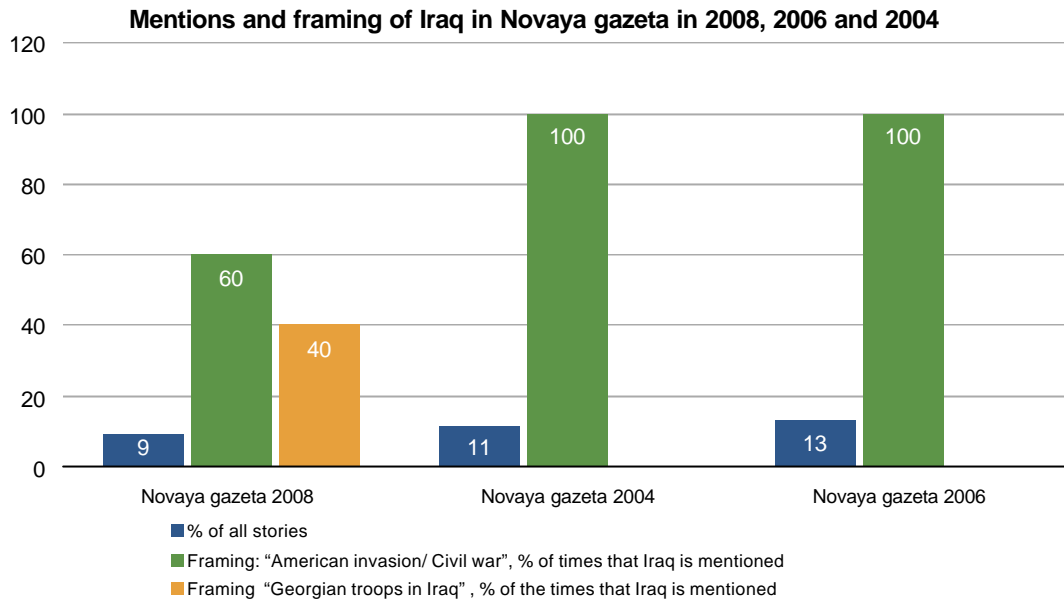


Figure 23 N=58 in 2008 (N=5 mentions), N=9 in 2004 (N=1 mention), N=8 in 2006 (N=1 mention)

Novaya gazeta mentioned Iraq in only nine percent of its stories in 2008. Iraq is mentioned quite neutrally as well – in stories that either analyze the Georgian military or discuss the role of America in the conflict. In both 2004 and 2006 *Novaya gazeta* published one story in which Iraq is mentioned. In all cases but one, where the word “Iraq” appears neutrally as an indication of a person’s nationality, Iraq is framed as a country enduring an ongoing civil war. There is no mention of the Georgian contingent.

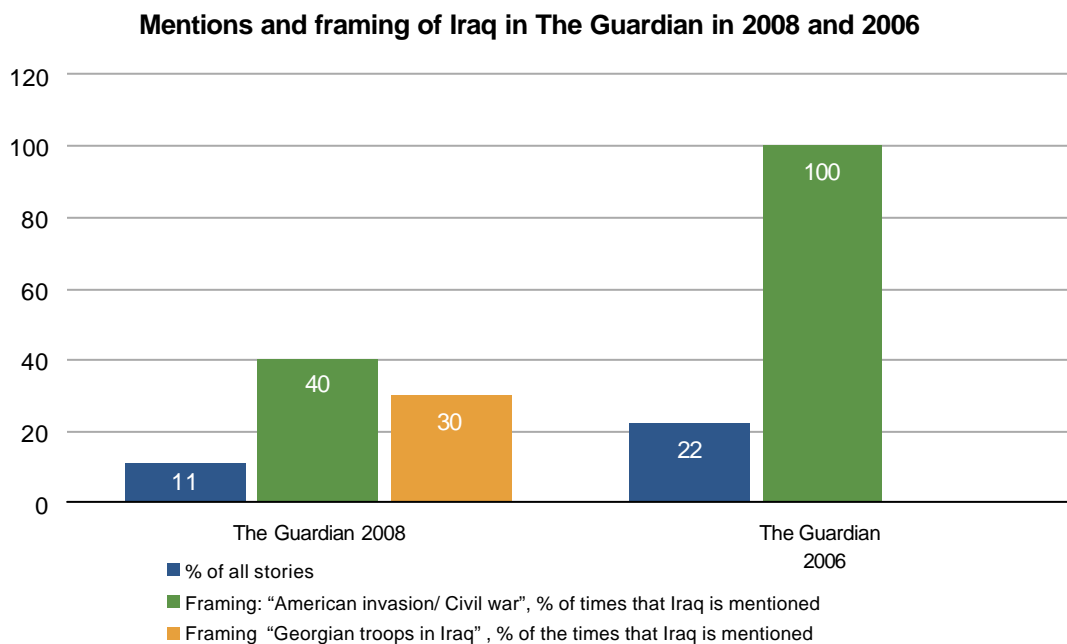


Figure 24 N=35 in 2008 (N=4 mentions), N=9 in 2006 (N=2 mentions)

In 2008, *The Guardian* mentioned Iraq in 11% of its stories, in most cases with reference to the war. However, *The Guardian* does not draw parallels between the American invasion of Iraq and the Russian invasion of Georgia. *The Guardian* wrote about Iraq twice in 2006, both times in the opinion column of a journalist currently travelling in the Caucasus. Georgian troops, however, are not mentioned.

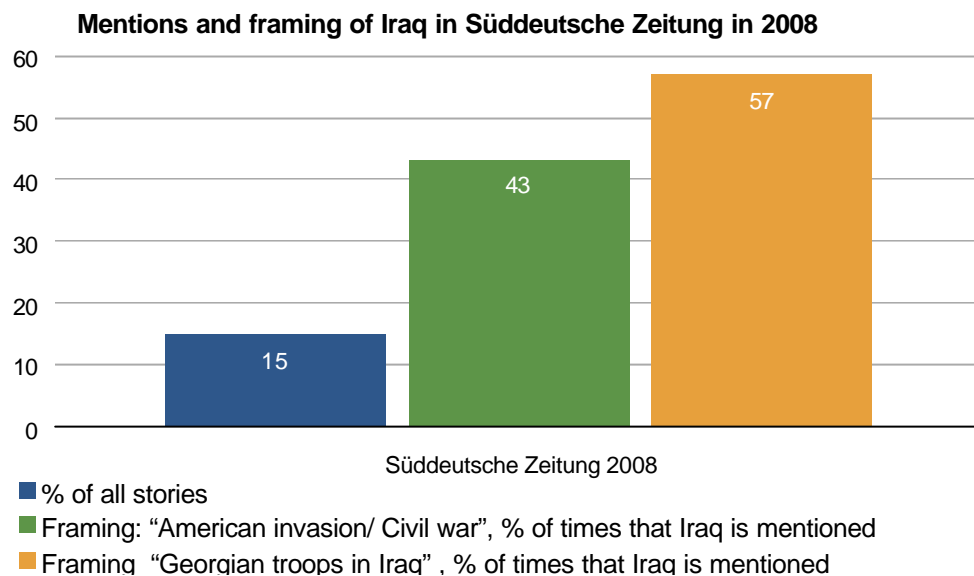


Figure 25 N=40 stories in 2008 (N=6 mentions)

Süddeutsche Zeitung mentions the withdrawal of Georgian troops from Iraq, but also mentions the American-led war there in critical terms:

*"The leadership of Russia does not think that they carry any moral responsibility with regards to the Iraq-warrior, Bush.
(Süddeutsche Zeitung 13.8.2008, editorial)*

In 2004 and 2006, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* did not mention Iraq.

7.2.4. Serbia and Kosovo

The so-called "Kosovo Precedent" has existed in Russian discourse for several years now. It became especially strong after the first countries recognized Kosovo's independence in February 2008. At the time, Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, was quoted as saying:

*"The Kosovo precedent is a terrifying precedent. It, in essence, is breaking open the entire system of international relations that have prevailed not just for decades but for centuries. And it, without a doubt, will bring on itself an entire chain of unforeseen consequences."*⁴⁹

The situation around the recognition of Kosovo, and the preceding NATO bombings of Serbia, were very high on the Russian propaganda agenda. The issue was also of vital importance for the Abkhaz and South Ossetians. For them, the recognition of Kosovo was a clear indication of the "double standards" of the West.⁵⁰

I examined whether Kosovo and/or Serbia appear in the pages of the papers during the 2008, 2006 and 2004 conflicts, and how they were framed. Figures 27, 28, 29 and 30 demonstrate how Kosovo/Serbia were presented in the papers:

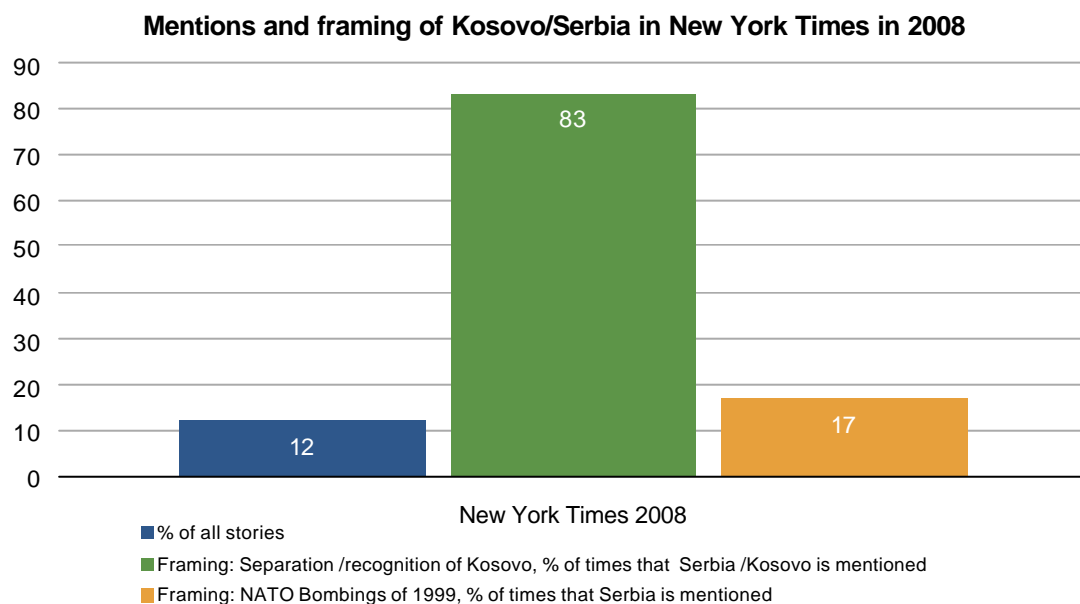


Figure 26 N=42 stories (N=5 mentions)

The New York Times mentions Serbia in 12 percent of its stories. In most cases, it is mentioned within the framework of the anger that Russia felt because of the West's recognition of Kosovo. American bombings are mentioned once, without criticism.

⁴⁹ See, for instance: *Kosovo Precedent Terrifying Putin* by Associated Press. <http://www.thestar.com/article/306151>.

⁵⁰ Paula Garb: *The View from Abkhazia of South Ossetia Ablaze*. In *Central Asian Survey* (upcoming).

During the summers of 2004 and 2006, *The New York Times* published one story about Serbia, that came out in June 2006. This story concentrated on the prospects for independence for Kosovo, discussing its possible consequences for the region:

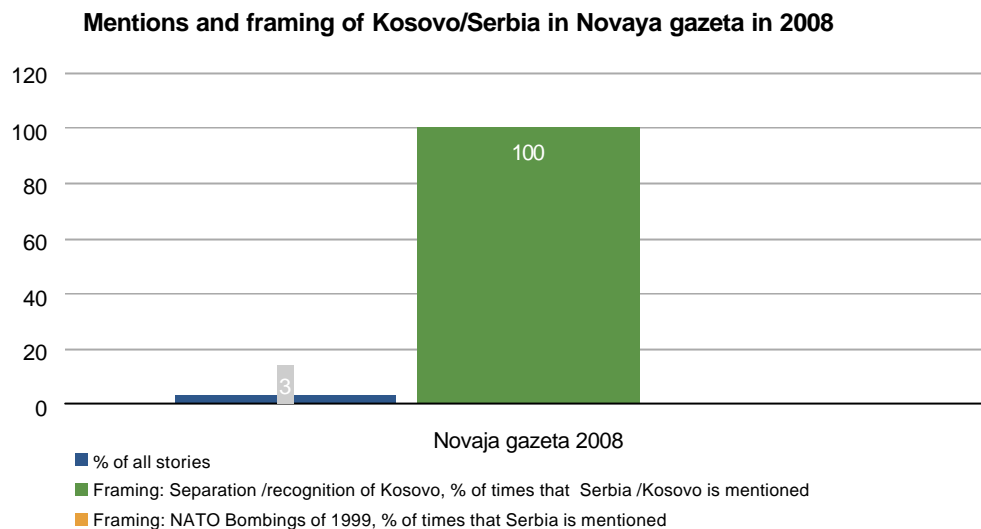


Figure 27 N=58 stories in 2008 (N=5 mentions)

Novyja gazeta does not mention the word “Serbia” at all, but refers to Kosovo in 3% of its stories. In every case, Kosovo is mentioned in conversation with a Western expert, or as a quote from the Western press. *Novaya gazeta* does not criticize the recognition of Kosovo or refer to the NATO bombing of Serbia. *Novaya gazeta* does not mention Kosovo or Serbia in its 2004/2006 material:

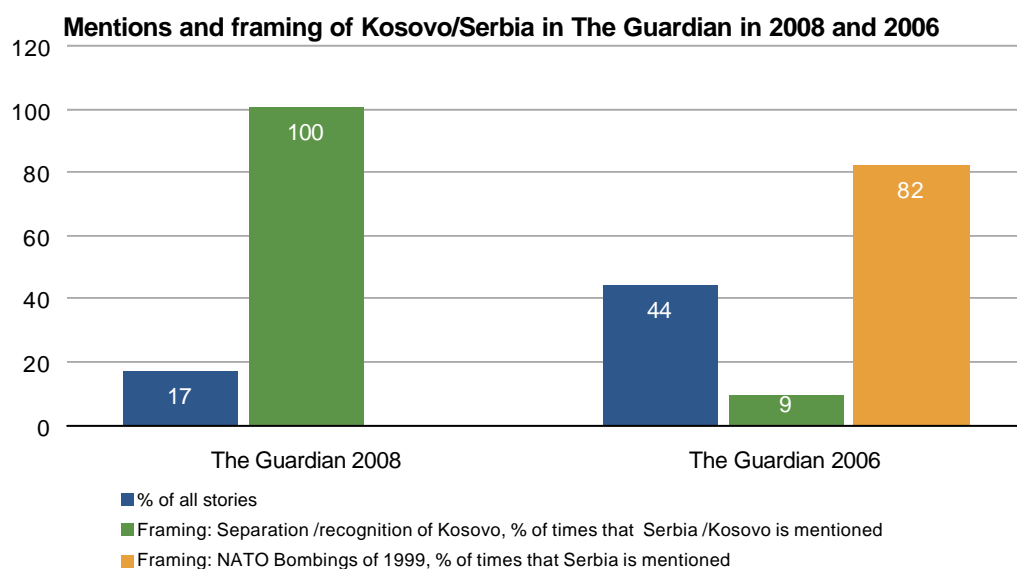


Figure 28 N=35 stories in 2008 (N=6 mentions), N=9 stories in 2006 (N=4 mentions)

The Guardian, in August 2008, mentioned Kosovo and/or Serbia in 17% of its stories. *The Guardian*, more than the other papers, tended to state that the independence of Kosovo was one of the reasons for the conflict. However, it never mentioned the bombing of Serbia in 1999. In 2004, Kosovo and/or Serbia were never mentioned in *The Guardian*. In 2006, Kosovo/Serbia were mentioned in 40% of its stories. *The Guardian* reports the independence of Montenegro as well as the ongoing negotiations about Kosovo, reminding its readers about the possible consequences for the Caucasus:

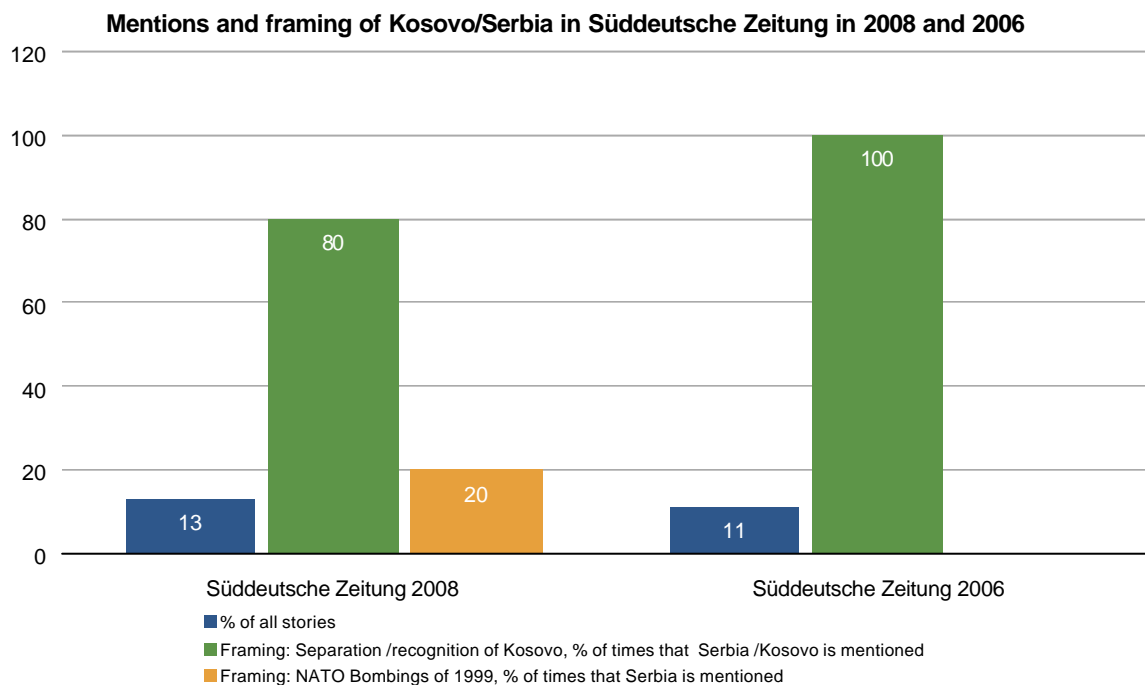


Figure 29 N=35 stories in 2008 (N=5 mentions), N=9 stories in 2006 (N=1 mention)

Süddeutsche Zeitung mentioned Kosovo in 13% of its stories about South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008, and 80% of them remind the readers about the Russian reaction to Kosovo's independence, using this as one of the contributory factors to the war. In the summer of 2004, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* did not mention Kosovo or Serbia. In 2006, there was a large story about a top-level meeting on the future of Kosovo, in which the paper writes about Russia's reaction concerning the precedent for South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Pridnestrovye.

7.2.5. Czechoslovakia in 1968

“This invasion, which echoes Afghanistan in 1979 and the Prague Spring of 1968, threatens to undermine the stability of the international security system.”⁵¹

As shown by a story written by the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, for *The Wall Street Journal* in August 2008, Czechoslovakia 1968 was an important historic landmark in Georgian war propaganda.

Figure 31 demonstrates whether this comparison appeared in the newspapers and how the words “Czechoslovakia” and “Prague” were framed in August 2008. The research materials from 2004 and 2006 did not include any mention of Czechoslovakia and/or Prague.

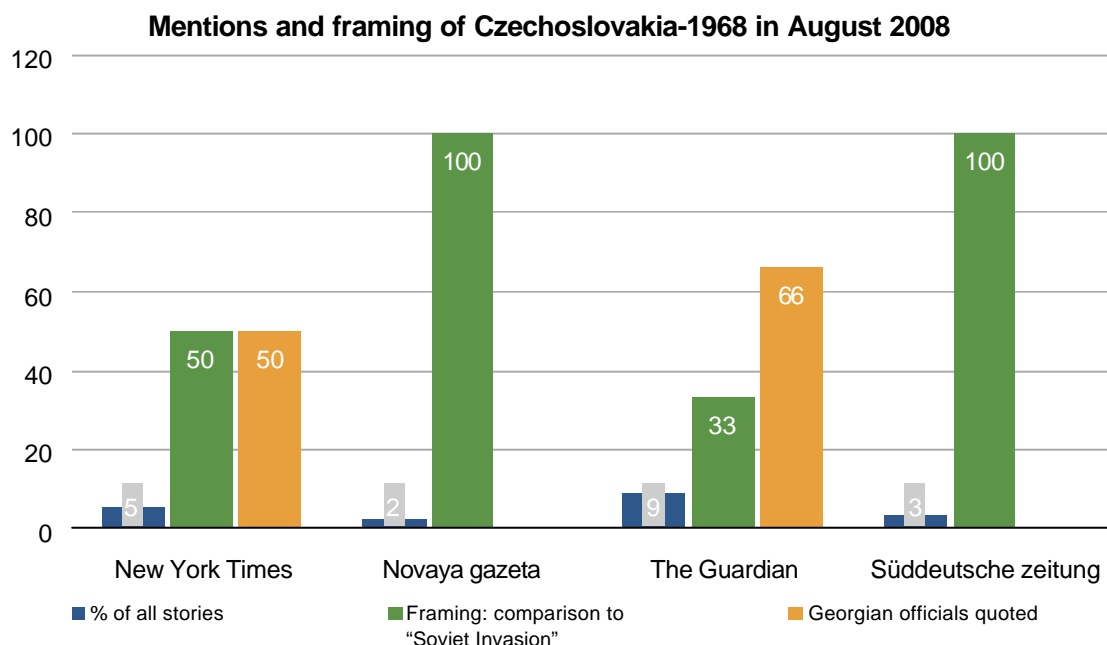


Figure 30 N=41 stories in *The New York Times* (N=2 mentions), N=58 stories in *Novaya gazeta* (N=1 mention), N=35 stories in *The Guardian* (N=3 mentions), N=40 stories in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (N=1 mention)

The New York Times mentioned Prague in 1968 only twice, in quotes from Mikheil Saakashvili and Condoleezza Rice, respectively. *Novyja gazeta* in 2008 mentioned Czechoslovakia in one story, in a quote from an interview with Russian experts about the Western coverage of the war. *The Guardian* mentions Czechoslovakia three times.

⁵¹ Mikheil Saakashvili: *The War in Georgia is a War for the West*. In *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 August 2008. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121841306186328421.html>.

Each time, the comparison with Prague is framed as something that either the Georgian politicians or other people have said:

“For many people, the sight of Russian tanks streaming across a border in August has uncanny echoes with Prague 1968” (The Guardian 9 August 2008).

Süddeutsche Zeitung mentions Czechoslovakia only once in an editorial; however, the paper does not hesitate in finding direct similarities between 1968 and 2008:

“40 years after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia is the Russian leadership claiming a zone of influence, bringing an unwilling Republic into alliance” (Süddeutsche Zeitung 13 August.2008).

7.2.6. Chechnya

Whereas Serbia and Kosovo provided Russia with arguments for her cause, Georgia did not fail to remind the world about Russian atrocities in Chechnya. Georgia’s Western friends were also eager to draw this comparison. As Norman Davies writes in a preface to the updated edition of Edward Lucas’ *New Cold War*:

“Despite Russian policy in the Caucasus being the matter in hand, few commentators have cared to draw the more telling parallel with the sad fate of Chechnya”.⁵²

Figures 32, 33, 34 and 35 show how often Chechnya appeared in the papers in 2008, 2006 and 2004, and how it was framed each time:

⁵² In Edward Lucas: *The New Cold War. How Kremlin Menaces both Russia and the West*. Revised paperback edition published in Great Britain, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.

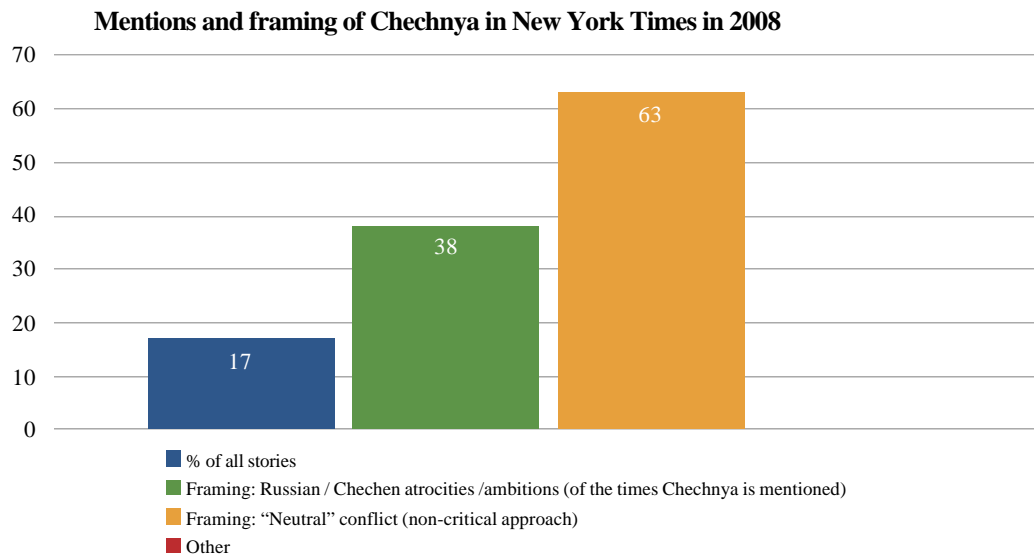


Figure 31 N=42 stories (N=8 mentions)

The New York Times does not mention Chechnya very often and, when it does, it appears most often in a “neutral” depiction of Russia’s domestic policy challenges. There is only one story, in which the complete destruction of Grozny is mentioned and compared to that in Tskhinvali.

In 2006, *The New York Times* mentioned Chechnya once, in a report from Abkhazia. This story reminds the readers of the thousands of civilians killed there. There was no mention of Chechnya in *The New York Times* in 2004.

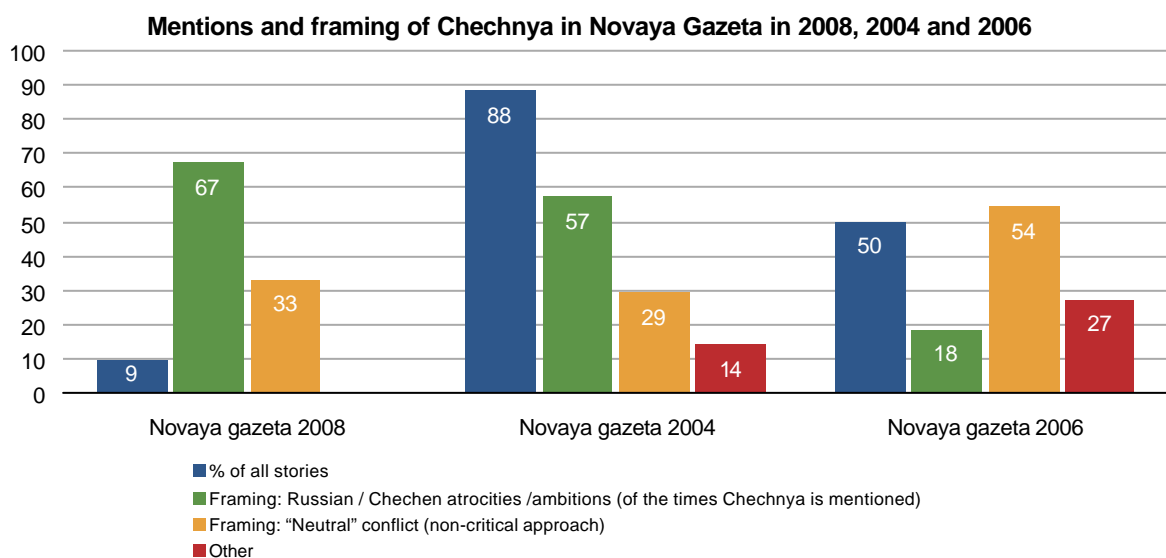


Figure 32 N=58 stories in 2008 (N=5 mentions), N=9 stories in 2004 (N=8 mentions), N=8 stories in 2006 (N=4 mentions)

Novaya gazeta mentions Chechnya in 9% of its stories; however, in most of these, it appears several times. I did not count how many times the word “Chechnyan” refers to the nationality of the fighters in the ongoing August 2008 war. Over two thirds of *Novaya gazeta*’s references to Chechnya, in one way or another, refer to the brutality of the war there.

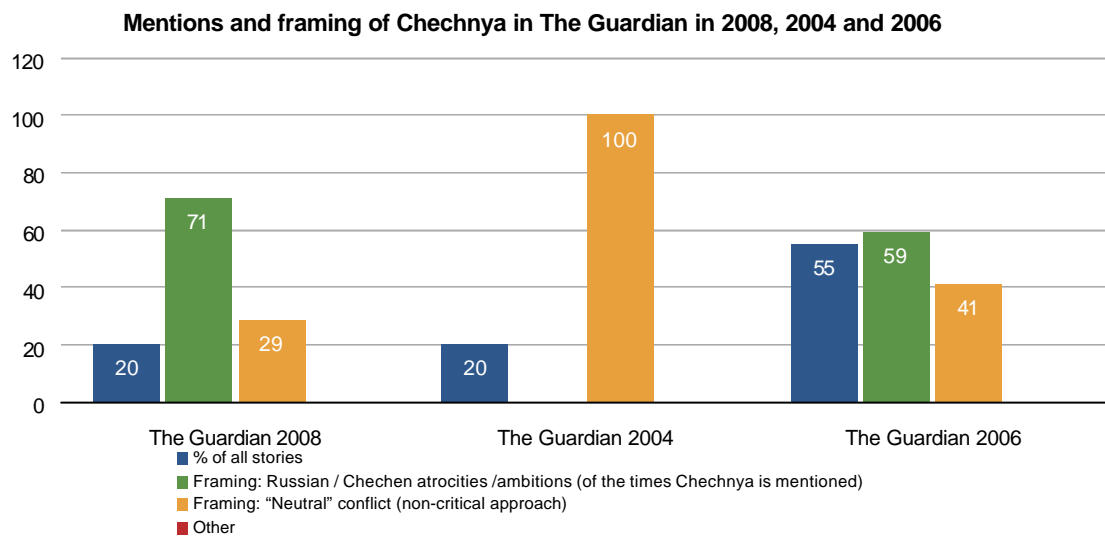


Figure 33 N=35 stories in 2008 (7 mentions), N=10 in 2004 (N=2 mentions), N=9 stories in 2006 (N=5 mentions)

The Guardian mentions Chechnya in twenty percent of its stories during the August 2008 war week. In most cases, the paper reminds (or quotes Georgian officials reminding) the readers of Russian’s crushing of the rebellion in Chechnya. In 2004, *The Guardian* mentions Chechnya in two cases: in a story about Putin’s visit to Chechnya and in short news item about US training of Georgian troops. In 2006, Chechnya appears in 55% of the stories, partly thanks to the death of Shamil Basayev. Chechnya is also discussed in columns about the Caucasus conflict, as the best-known and bloodiest of the wars.

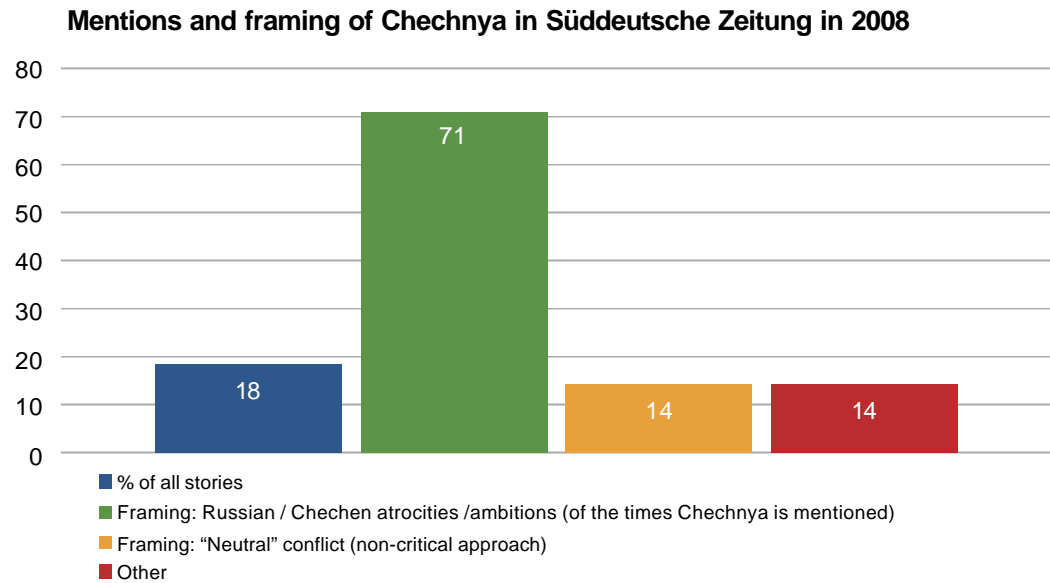


Figure 34 N=40 stories in 2008 (N=7 mentions)

Chechnya appeared in 18% of the stories in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in August 2008. Most of these remind the reader about Russian operations in Chechnya, such as the term “restoring constitutional order”, familiar from Putin but used by Saakashvili. 30% of the references to Chechnya, however, concentrate on other things, such as news unrelated to the ongoing conflict.

The Caucasus-related stories in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in the summers of 2004 and 2006 did not mention Chechnya.

7.3. Empirical Results for Subchapter 7.2.

The papers were quite modest in using comparisons with previous conflicts, as are sometimes aggressively suggested by the Georgian and Russian propaganda machines. However, the Georgian “agenda” (about Prague 1968, Afghanistan, Chechnya) featured in the papers slightly more often than the Russian one about Kosovo and Iraq. Chechnya was the only issue that was clearly on the agenda also in 2004 and 2006. The interesting issue was the difference between the papers. *The New York Times* used comparisons with other conflicts slightly more frequently than the others, but things like Prague 1968 would appear in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *The Guardian* as well.

However, *Novaya gazeta* was the most cautious in mentioning previous conflicts, other than Chechnya. *Novaya gazeta* was highly critical of Russian actions in Chechnya, and did not follow the Russian propaganda in reporting the August war.

7.4. “Aggression” – who was worse?

“Aggression” was a word widely used in both the Russian and Georgian vocabularies. To Russia, the war was about Georgian aggression against Russian citizens living in South Ossetia, while the Georgians referred to it as an imperialistic endeavour by Russia to overthrow Georgia’s democratically-elected government.

In international law, aggression is a concept referring to a state actor. In this way, Georgia’s acts in South Ossetia cannot be defined as aggression, since aggression can only happen between states.⁵³ The UN definition of aggression states:⁵⁴

“Any of the following acts, regardless of a declaration of war, shall, subject to and in accordance with the provisions of article 2, qualify as an act of aggression:

(a) The invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State, or any military occupation, however temporary, resulting from such invasion or attack, or any annexation by the use of force of the territory of another State or part thereof...”

However, the right of a third state actually to use force at the invitation of a government (of a recognized state) in order to keep that government in power is taken for granted by the states. It is said that the definition of aggression implicitly acknowledges the right of a state to invite a foreign army, although the failure of that foreign army to leave would constitute aggression.⁵⁵

In the case of the August 2008 war, from the South Ossetian viewpoint, Russia definitely was not an aggressor but a saviour: however, from the international law viewpoint, South Ossetia is not a “state” that has the right to invite foreign troops into its territory. For Georgians, the situation looked completely different – Russia was the aggressor – and, for South Ossetians (and Russians defending their intrusion into South Ossetia and Georgia proper), Georgia was the aggressor.

⁵³ Conversation with Neil Macfarlane, 22 April 2009.

⁵⁴ A/Res/29/3314 of 14 December 1974, <http://www.un-documents.net/a29r3314.htm>

⁵⁵ Christine Gray: *International Law and the Use of Force*. Oxford University Press 2008, p. 85.

7.4.1. “Aggression” in August 2008

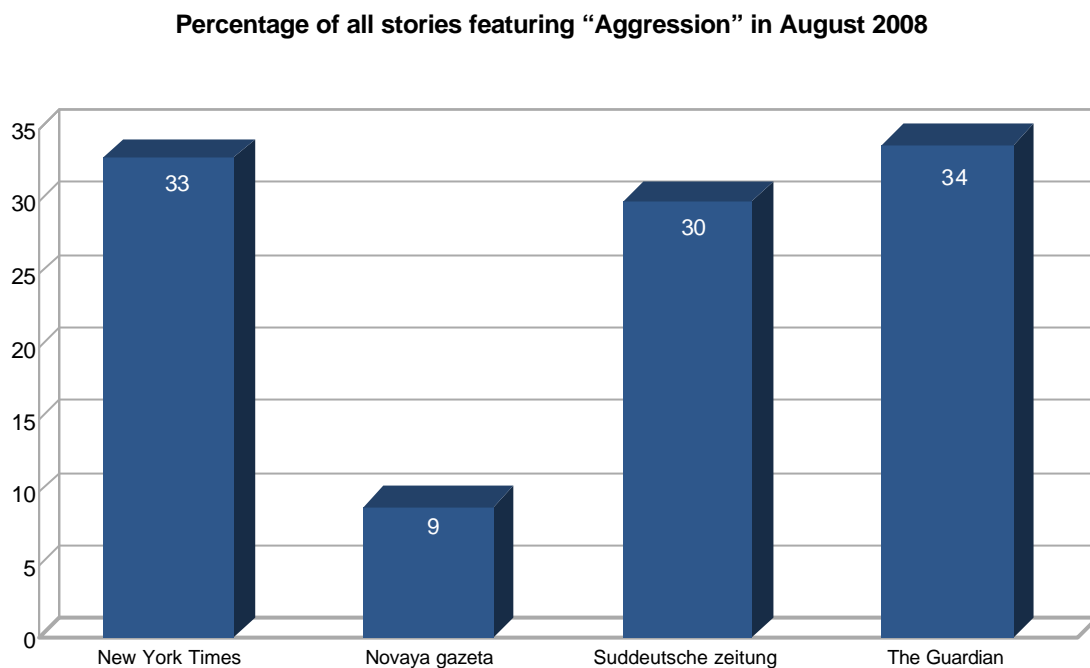


Figure 35 N=42 stories in *The New York Times*, N=58 stories in *Novaya gazeta*, N=40 stories in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, N=35 stories in *The Guardian*

Figure 35 shows the percentage of stories in which the term “aggression” or “aggressive” appeared with reference to Russia or Georgia. *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* feature the term in 30-34 percent of all stories. *Novaya gazeta* uses the term in only nine percent of all stories.

I searched for references to aggression – counting the words “aggression” and “aggressive” –, taking into account references to both Russia and Georgia. Figures 37-40 demonstrate how “aggression” appeared in the papers’ news sections as well as editorials.

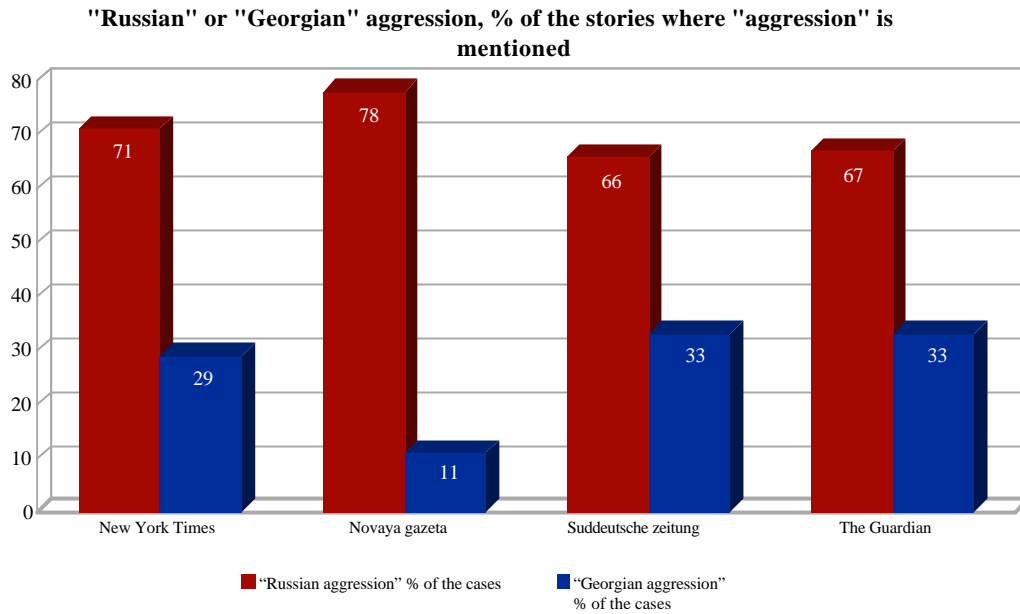


Figure 36 N=14 stories in the New York Times, N=9 stories in *Novaya gazeta*, N=12 in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, N=12 stories in *The Guardian*

Figure 36 shows that, in most cases (67-78 percent), when “aggression” was mentioned, it referred to Russian aggression rather than Georgian.

Russian/Georgian aggression in news and editorials of New York Times in August 2008

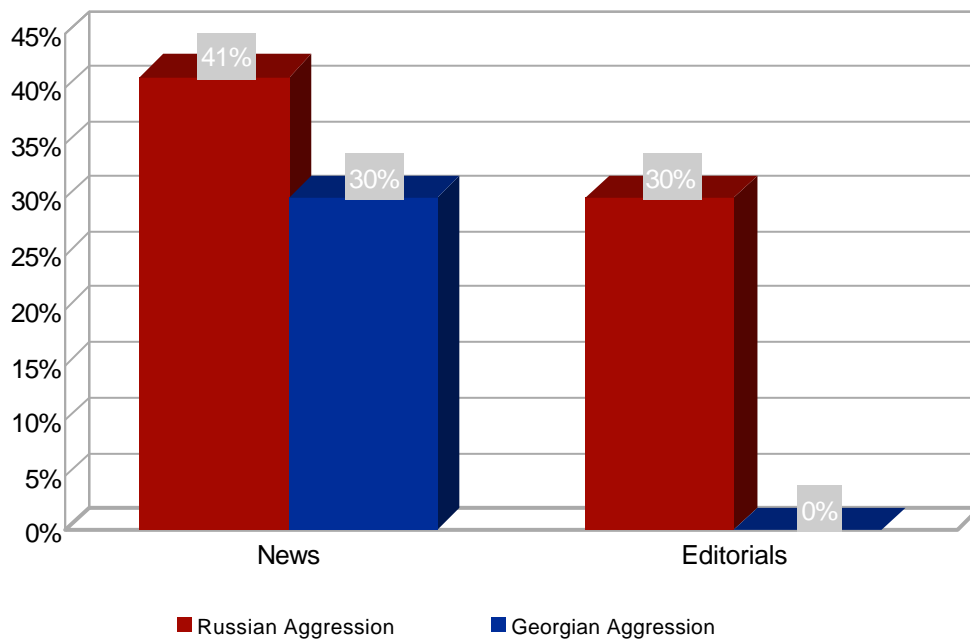


Figure 37 N=14 stories

This figure (37) shows how the word “aggression” appeared in the news and editorials/columns (N= 14 times). “Georgian aggression” did not appear in *The New York Times*’ editorials and columns at all. Also, the phrase “Georgian aggression” in the news consisted only of quotes from Russian officials, Russian TV or a South Ossetian refugee.

There seems to be a much more widespread consensus about Russian aggression. The editorials do not hesitate to condemn Russia:

“Europe and the United States must make clear to Mr. Medvedev — and the real power player, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin — that more aggression and lies will not be tolerated” (The New York Times, editorial , 13 August 2008).

In both 2004 and 2006, “aggression” appeared once in *The New York Times*, respectively. On both occasions, it was contained in a quote from Russian officials, referring to Saakashvili’s aggressive behaviour with regard to the breakaway territories.

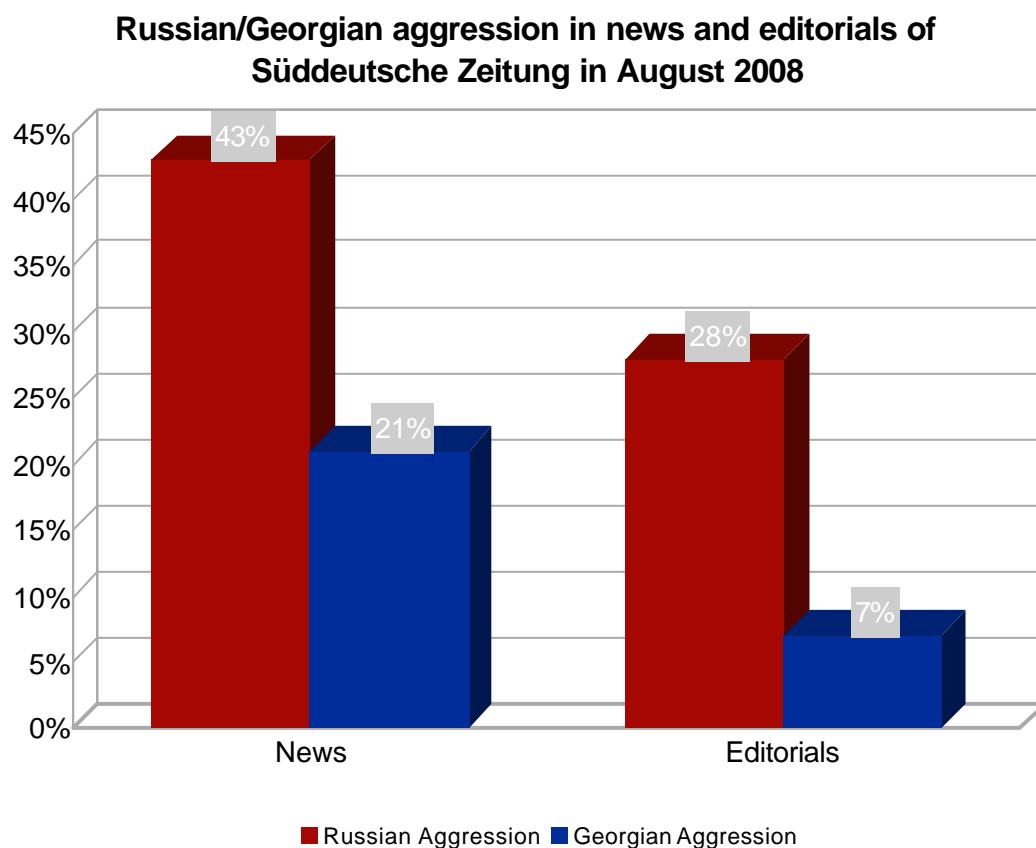


Figure 38 N=12 stories

Figure 38 shows that, in most cases, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* mentioned “aggression” in the news. The paper would often quote Western officials – in this case Dick Cheney, David Miliband as well as the Baltic leaders, whose solidarity visit to Tbilisi was covered by *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in more detail than in the other papers. Aggression is also mentioned in editorials; however, only once did the author directly condemn Russia as the aggressor. “Georgian aggression” appears far less frequently, and, each time, be it in the news or editorial/column, it appeared as a quote from Russian officials.

Süddeutsche Zeitung did not mention the terms “aggression” or “aggressive” in its reportage in summer 2006. In 2004, however, the term appears twice, accounting for 14% of the stories. In both cases, President Saakashvili is criticized for aggressive behaviour, firstly by the South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity, and, secondly, by the Abkhazian *de facto* authorities.

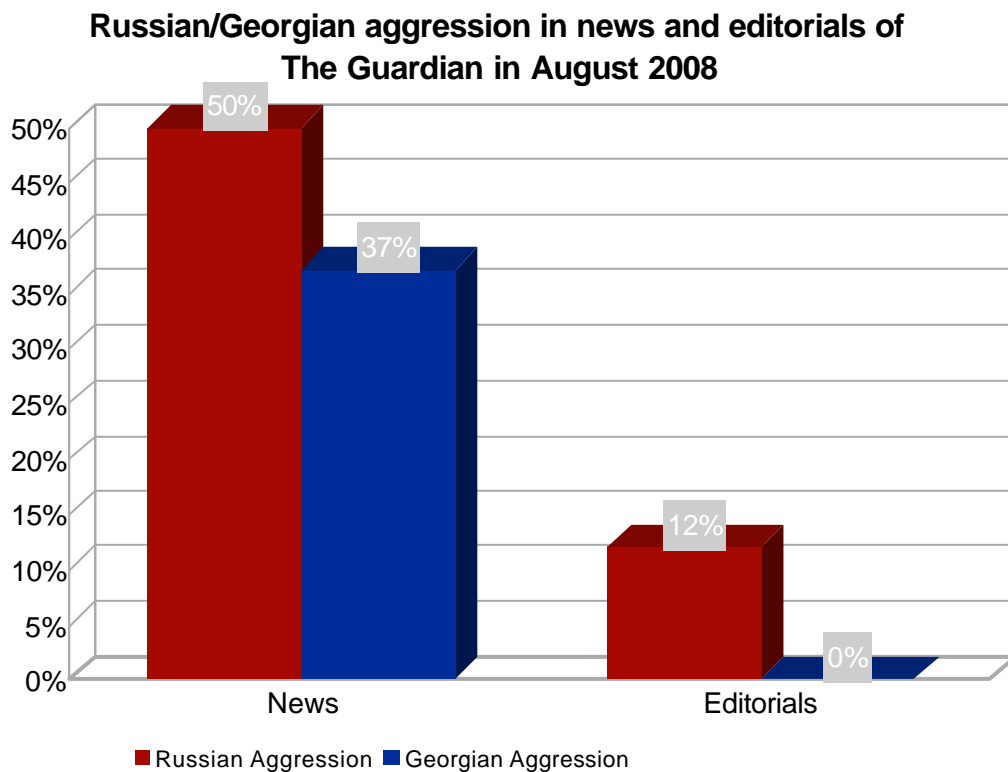


Figure 39

N=12 stories

As in the case of *The New York Times*, “Georgian aggression” did not appear in the editorial materials at all. There was only one story, however, in which the author of the column condemned Russian aggression. The other columnist was very critical of the West.⁵⁶

In 2004, *The Guardian* used the term “aggression” only once, in a story headlined “Russia Warning over Tourists in Georgia ‘War Zone’”. This story reports how Moscow had issued a warning to Georgia that it would protect holidaying Russians against any aggression in Abkhazia. In 2006, I found no mention of the word “aggression”.

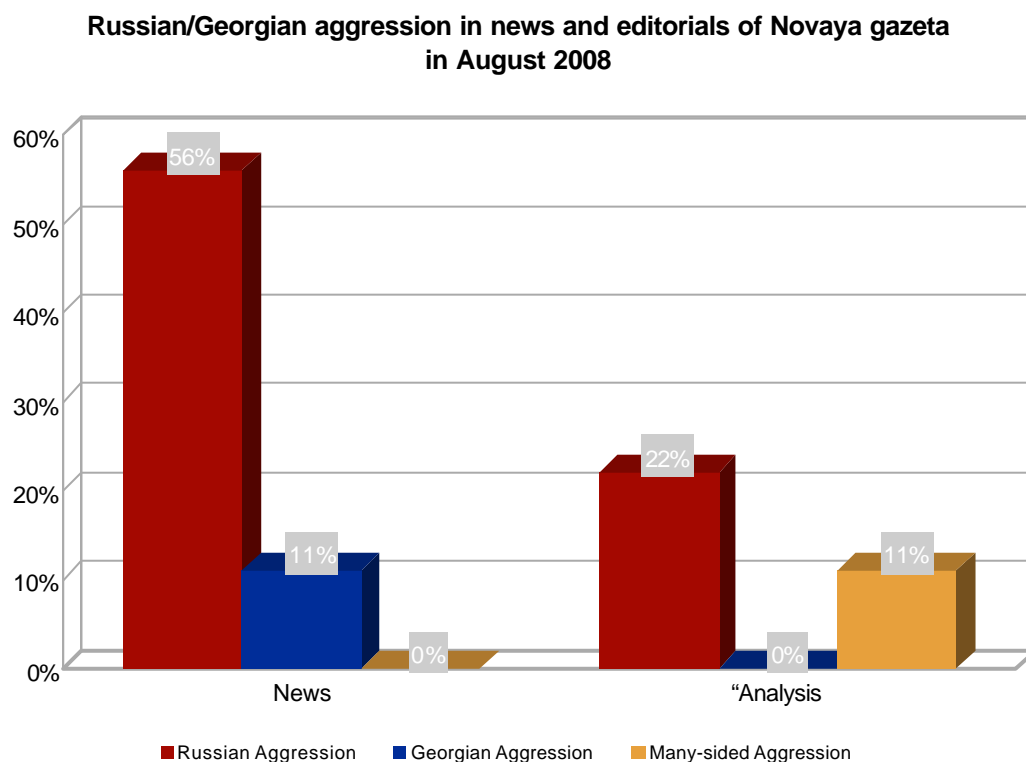


Figure 40 N=9 stories

As demonstrated in figure 40, *Novaya gazeta* did not mention aggression in most of its stories. It should be noted, however, that if all the Russian news agency material that appeared in the pages of *Novaya gazeta* had been analyzed for that week, “Georgian aggression” would certainly have appeared multiple times.

⁵⁶ Seumas Milne: *This is a tale of US expansion, not Russian aggression*. *The Guardian*, 14 August, 2008.

However, in the stories analyzed in this paper, Russia appeared to be the aggressor in 78% of the cases. Again, as in the case of *The New York Times*, the only time when the term ‘Georgian aggression’ appeared was in a quote from a Russian official.

7.5. Empirical Results for Subchapter 7.4.

The papers seemed unanimous in regarding Russia as the aggressor in this conflict. The term “Georgian aggression”, in most cases, only appeared in quotes from the Russian authorities. *Novaya gazeta* was the most moderate in using the term. The word “aggression” appeared very seldom in 2004 and 2006, but, when it did, it referred to Mikheil Saakashvili’s policies, in most cases.

7.6. Russian War Propaganda: the Rumour of the Two Thousand Victims

During the first days of the conflict, Russia released information that up to 2000 people had died. This alleged high number of civilian casualties was used, among other things, as grounds for Russia’s subsequent massive attack on Georgia.

This figure was very soon disputed by human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Memorial. Eventually, the Russian side revised the estimate to 300-400 civilian victims, which was called a “useful starting point” by Human Rights Watch.⁵⁷ In an interview on October 12, a representative of the Russian General Prosecutor talked about 159 confirmed civilian deaths,⁵⁸ while the Georgian side confirmed 156 military and 69 civilian deaths in September 2009.⁵⁹ The South Ossetian military and militia deaths were estimated by Russian sources at 150, and Russian military deaths at 64.⁶⁰

What makes this question important is the size of South Ossetia. Even the most optimistic estimates of the total population are below 100,000. Knowing that many of the people had been evacuated before the outbreak of the war, one can assume that the number of civilians in Tskhinval/i and its surrounding villages at the start of the war

⁵⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/7692751.stm

⁵⁸ <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19979&search=war%20casualties>.

⁵⁹ <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19384&search=war%20casualties>.

⁶⁰ <http://www.mdb.cast.ru/mdb/3-2008/item3/article1/>.

cannot have exceeded 40-50,000 people. Out of this number, 2000 dead within a day or two would have been a huge death toll.

Table 2 shows which papers published those figures and whether they indicated to the readers the fact that the figures came only from one source and could not be verified independently.

Table 2: War Victims in the Press

Paper	2000 victims published	Date published	Other figures/dates published
<i>The New York Times</i>	6 times	Aug 10 th , 12 th , 14 th (three times)	1500 / Aug 9 th “less than 100”, Aug 13 th
<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	3 times	Aug 11 th	Aug 12 th : “no reliable information”
<i>The Guardian</i>	4 times	Aug 11 th (three times) Aug 14 th	1400 (Aug 9 th) 1600 (Aug 12 th)
<i>Novaya gazeta</i>	4 times	Aug 10 th Aug 13 th (three times)	

7.6.1. The New York Times

The New York Times publishes the figure of 2000 six times, in 14% of its stories. However, the paper releases other figures as well.

Already on August 9, the paper publishes a story headlined “1500 reported killed in Georgia battle”. In this story, the paper refers to the Russian authorities as a source for the number of casualties. In another story published the same day, however, the

paper states 1500 again, together with Georgian figures of more than 800 injured, stating that “each sides’ figures are impossible to confirm independently”.

The next day, August 10, the paper mentions the figure of 2000 for the first time, and writes that:

“the reports of the death toll varied.... From the low hundreds to more than 2000 but could not be independently verified”.

The figure of 2000, again referred to the Russian authorities or officials, re-appears on August 8 and August 14. During the latter day, the figure appears in three different stories. In two of them, it appears as the death toll announced by the Russian authorities. The third story quotes human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, stating that the “early Russian accounts of casualties... were far too high”. A Human Rights Watch expert had been mentioned briefly already, the day before, August 13, when *The New York Times* wrote that the organisation had been able to confirm that there had been fewer than 100 deaths.

7.6.2. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

Information about 2000 victims appeared three times in August 2008. It should be noted that this information appeared on August 11 only. The figure appears twice in the news and once in a comment story. On each occasion, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* underlines that this figure is according to Russian sources and denied by Georgia.

On August 12, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a story about the displaced people of this war, citing UN agencies and the Red Cross. In this story, the paper notes briefly that, “there is no reliable information about the amount of people lost and dead”.

During the following days, the paper makes no further reference to the number of dead.

7.6.3. *The Guardian*

The Guardian states exaggerated figures for the number of dead in six stories, which covers 17% of all the Abkhazia- – and South Ossetia- – related stories for August 2008.

Firstly, on August 9, the paper cites the *de facto* leader of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoity, as saying that 1400 civilians had been killed (meaning on the very first day of the war). The paper adds that “*there was no independent confirmation of his assertion*”.

As in the case of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, on August 11, the paper mentions the figure of 2000 victims three times. This figure first appears in the very first sentence of the front-page story about the war, talking about “*the three-day conflict in which 2000 people have reportedly been killed ...*” This figure is placed under a question mark later in a “fact box” about the key developments of the war, that states that:

“More than 2000 people had been killed in South Ossetia since Friday, according to Russia. The figure could not be verified”.

The figure re-appears in an editorial, in a quote by the Russian deputy foreign minister, but the author adds that “*there was no independent confirmation of these figures*”.

On the following day, August 12, the figure fell slightly again and appeared only in an editorial that quotes Russians as saying that 1600 civilians had been killed in the shelling. Finally, on August 14, the paper published a story in which it quotes a Human Rights Watch expert disputing the figures released by the Russians, as follows:

“The Russian estimates of 2000 dead were suspicious ... “our findings so far do not in any way confirm the Russian statistics ... on the contrary, they suggest the numbers are exaggerated”.

What is notable here is that the last story was the shortest of the three, and located in the corner of a page. Before that, however, the incorrect figures appeared twice in a front-page story and twice in an editorial.

7.6.4. *Novaya gazeta*

Novaya gazeta mentions the figures in four stories out of the 58 published in August 2008. The figure appeared for the first time on August 10, where the author writes that “*the Ossetians counted 2000 victims*”. The figure is not disputed.

However, when it re-appeared in three stories on August 13, the figure was disputed on each occasion. In a story headlined “*Who counted and how*”, *Novaya gazeta* states all of the figures released officially by Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia. *Novaya gazeta* is the only one of the papers researched that tries to find the source for the figure of 2000 dead. The paper wrote:

“On August 11, the Russian MFA talked about 1600 dead. During the course of the same day, the figure was transformed into 2000 and underwent no further changes. The majority of news agencies put it out referring to “the figures from the Russian side”. However, we could find neither the source of these figures, nor the method of counting. For instance, the Ossetian diaspora in Moscow, when referring to this figure, explained it quite simply: ‘Well, we watch TV’.” (Novaya gazeta, August 13 2009).

Further, on the same day, the paper published a story in which Human Rights Watch stated that the Russian figure of 2000 victims is “*not just unchecked but incorrect*”. In this interview, the Human Rights Watch’s representative explained why the organization is sure that the figure of 2000 is incorrect, criticising also the official Russian figures regarding the number of refugees.

The third story on August 13, in which the figures appear, is an interview with Sabine Freizer, the director of the Europe programme at the International Crisis Group. She agrees that the figure of 2000 victims is likely to be overestimated.

7.7. Empirical Results for Subchapter 7.6.

The story of 2000 victims was a good example of how difficult it was for journalists to check the facts and get reliable information during the August 2008 war. Some papers published the figure with no doubt or criticism at all. Also, surprisingly, there were stories published the same day by the same papers that approached the figures differently.

Novaya gazeta was the most critical of the figures, and was also the only one of the papers that provided the readers with some background about the source of the figures.

7.8. “The Georgian Democracy”

President Mikheil Saakashvili was eager to stress that the war was not simply a Russian attack on Georgia, but also an attack on democracy.⁶¹

But what do we mean, when we talk about democracy? The concept became especially fashionable after the fall of communism in Europe – it was supposed to represent an alternative to the sluggish, authoritarian, citizen-unfriendly systems of the communist countries. As Hobson and Kurki noted, it may be premature to conclude that democracy is in trouble, but the stalling and reversal of the democratic progress in many countries pose difficult questions for analysts. Most importantly, in the light of recent developments in post-Soviet countries, the rethinking of what it means to “support”, “promote” or “assist” becomes essential.⁶²

President Saakashvili, however, has embraced the concept whenever possible. One of his main ideas was to build a true democracy in his country, albeit without ever really defining the concept clearly. Russia, with its own “sovereign democracy” – largely understood as a system combining elite control with classical state sovereignty⁶³ – provided President Saakashvili with a perfect antidote, and, in the hype following the Rose Revolution, nobody seemed to ask the essential question of what democracy, and its promotion and support, really means.

Vicken Cheterian writes that, for the leaders of the Rose revolution in Georgia, democracy was important as the identity marker of becoming part of the west. In this sense, writes Cheterian, democracy was an external attribute, a self-declared ideology that aligned Georgia with the West, rather than a certain political practice (such as free elections and other internal attributes of democratic performance).⁶⁴

I tried to find out how “democracy” appeared in stories related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Is “Georgia being democratic”, taken at face value? How often does “democracy” appear, referring to Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia or South Ossetia?

⁶¹ See, for instance Lally Weymouth: “Russia Should Follow Georgia’s Lead” in *Newsweek*, September 27th, 2008 <http://www.newsweek.com/id/161206/page/2>.

⁶² Christopher Hobson & Milja Kurki: “*Democracy and democracy-support: a new era.*” <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/idea/democracy-and-democracy-support-a-new-era>.

⁶³ See, for instance Ivan Krastev: “*Sovereign Democracy, Russian-style*” http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/sovereign_democracy_4104.jsp.

⁶⁴ Vicken Cheterian: Georgia’s Rose Revolution: Change or Repetition? Tension between State-building and Modernization Projects. *Nationalities Papers*, Vol 36, Issue 4, September 2008, pp 689-712.

I did not count the term where it, for instance, referred to “Democrats” as an American political party, or was otherwise unrelated to either Russia or Georgia.

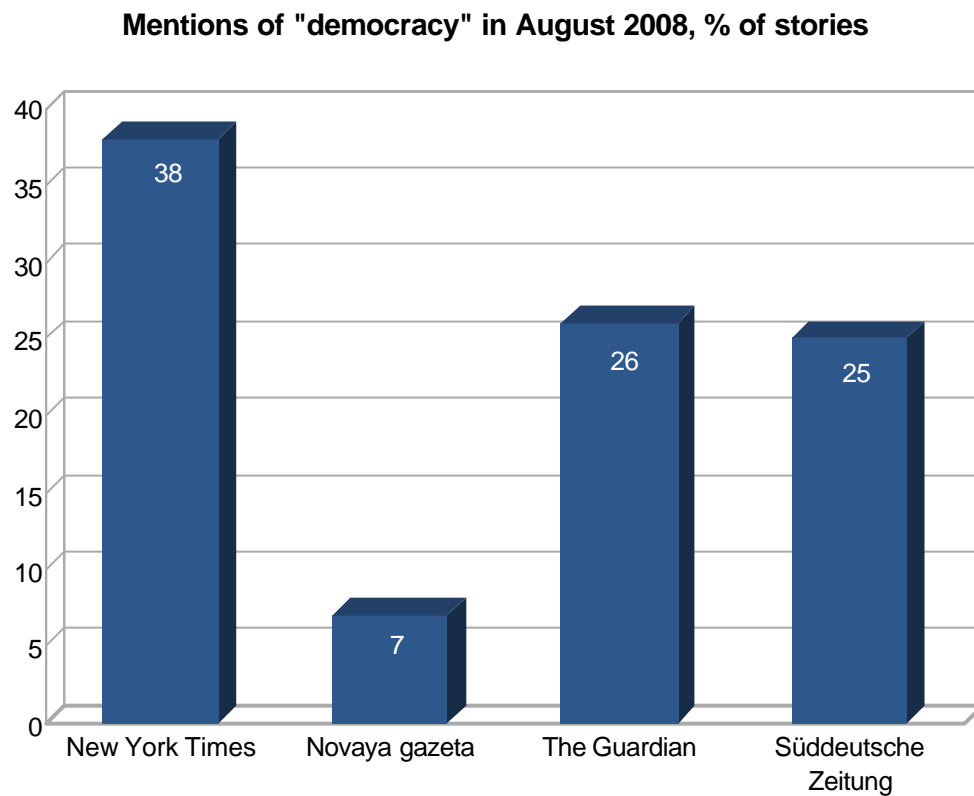
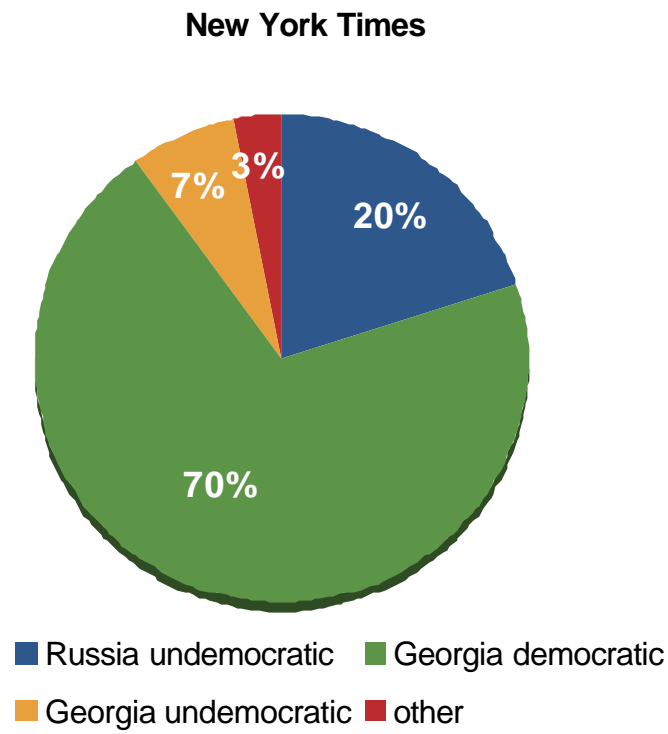


Figure 41 N=42 stories in the *The New York Times*, N=58 stories in *Novaya gazeta*, N=35 in *The Guardian*, N=40 stories in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

Figure 41 demonstrates the percentages of stories in which the word “democracy” appeared between 8 and 15 August 2008. *The New York Times* used the word in 38% of its stories, *The Guardian* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 26 and 25 percent, and *Novaya gazeta* in seven percent only.

Figures 42-44 show how “democracy” was framed in the papers.

Figure 42: *The New York Times* and democracy



"Democracy" in New York Times, % of stories where "democracy" is mentioned

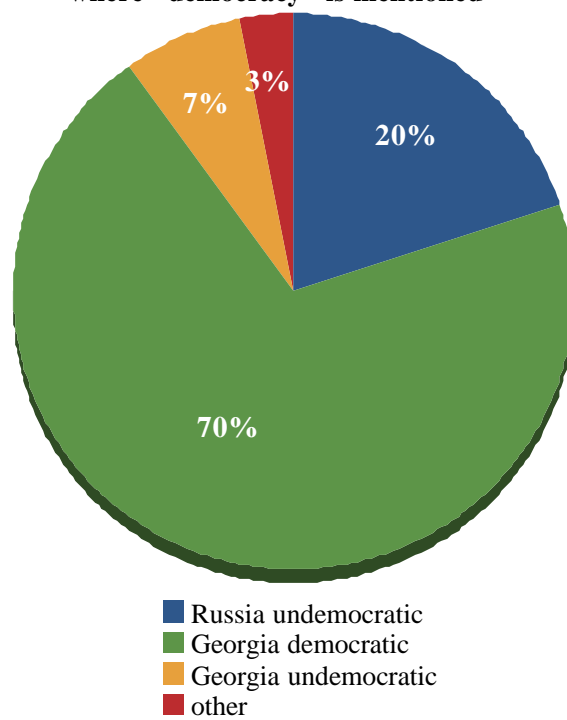


Figure 42

N=30 mentions

In most cases, *The New York Times* underlined the democratic nature of Georgia. Usually, this meant American officials promoting and/or praising democracy in Georgia. These kinds of statement appeared in news and editorials as well.

**"Democracy" in The Guardian, % of stories where
"democracy" is mentioned**

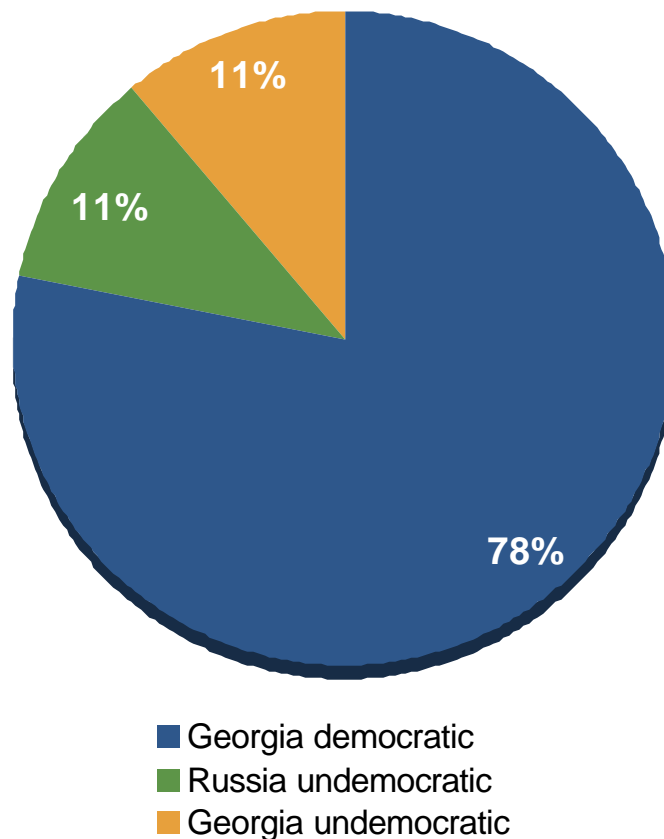


Figure 43 N=18 mentions

Like *The New York Times*, “Georgia democratic” was the most common framing of democracy. *The Guardian*, however, refrained from making direct statements, but preferred to quote Georgian as well as Western officials as saying that Georgia is democratic, and that the war was an attack on democracy.

"Democracy" in Süddeutsche Zeitung, % of stories where "democracy" is mentioned

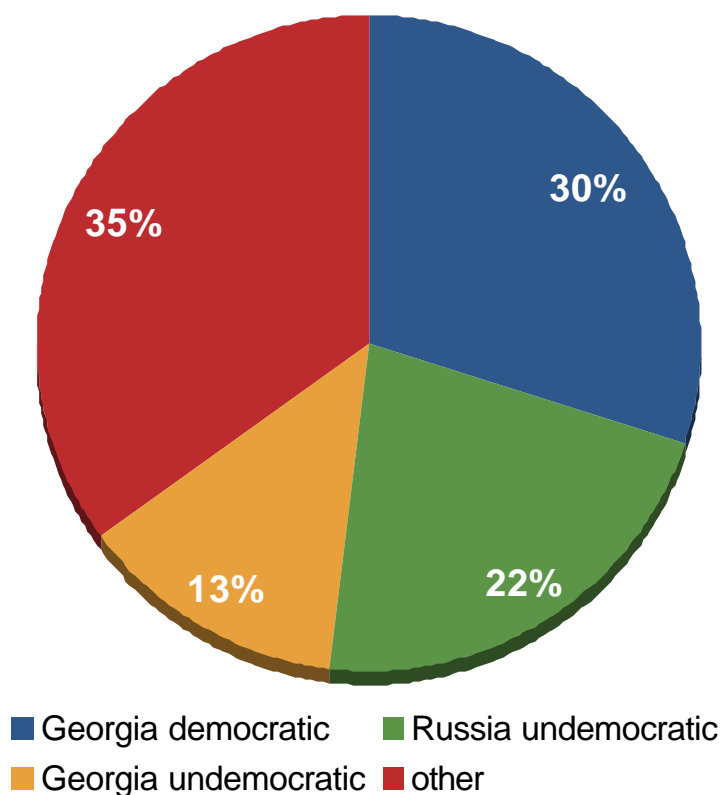


Figure 44 N=23 mentions

Süddeutsche Zeitung used “democracy” quite similarly to the other papers – it wrote about how democratic a country Georgia is. Even in a story criticizing Georgian democracy, the paper did not forget to mention that “Georgia is the most democratic country of the former Soviet Union”.

7.8.1. *Novaya gazeta* and democracy

Novaya gazeta’s approach to democracy differed from that of the other papers. The term ‘democracy’ appeared only four times in *Novaya gazeta* in the stories analyzed in August 2008. Once was in a story about the coverage of the war by the Western press, in which *Novaya gazeta* quoted *Times online* as saying that “*It is true that Georgia is now a democracy*”. Another time was in an overview of blogs about the war in Russia and Georgia, where a quoted blogger wrote: “*when watching CNN, one starts wanting to go to the nearest Russian Embassy in order to protest against the*

aggression in the territory of the democratic Georgia". The third was an analytical story, in which the author considered the consequences of the war, and the fourth was in a quote from the forum of *Novaya gazeta*. The paper had asked its readers whom they found guilty for the war.

Novaya gazeta's approach to "democracy" is very different from that of the other papers. "Democracy" does not appear as a self-evident attribute of Georgia, nor does the paper quote Western leaders praising Georgian democracy. The paper seems even somewhat indifferent towards this term, or at least careful in using it.

7.8.2. Democracy in 2004 and 2006

The term "Democracy" was used quite differently in all of the papers in their stories about Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the summers of 2004 and 2006.

In 2004, only *Novaya gazeta* mentioned "democracy" in a single story – a long interview with a Soviet-era dissident and the current opposition politician in Georgia. He was quoted as saying that "*Saakashvili has a problem with democracy*". The other papers did not use the term at all, according to my data.

In 2006, the term "democracy" appeared 19 times in 6 stories out of 20 (30% of the total) in *The New York Times*. However, only in two stories is the term "democracy" related to Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The most important framing for "democracy" in the summer of 2006 was the appearance of "sovereign democracy" as the guiding principle of Russian domestic and foreign policy.

In *The Guardian* in 2006, the term appeared in 3 stories out of nine. One of them was a news piece, in which Dick Cheney was criticizing democracy in Russia. The other two stories were columns; one of them discussed the problems of democracy in Russia, and the other quoted the *de facto* president of Abkhazia as saying that Abkhazia has spent years building its democracy.

Süddeutsche Zeitung mentioned "democracy" once in 2006, in a column in which the author wrote about the development of democracy in the former Soviet Union.

Novaya gazeta did not mention democracy at all in the 2006 material.

7.9. Empirical Results for Subchapter 7.8.

In August 2008, the papers were unanimous that Georgia was a democracy. The fact that Russia was undemocratic was less frequently reported. Georgia's problems with democracy were also reported, but much less often than its advances in the democratic processes.

Novaya gazeta differed from the other papers: it used the term far less often than *The New York Times*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *The Guardian*.

Georgia's democratic nature was not underlined in this way during the 2004 and 2006 conflicts. "Democracy" appeared seldom on the pages of the papers, and there was very little praise for Georgia's democracy.

7.10. The Picture of Abkhazia and South Ossetia - Russian Puppets and Separatists or Small Nations Searching for Freedom?

"What amazed me the most was the way we were ignored in all these meetings. It was as if everything was just about Georgia and Russia, and we did not exist."

A colleague of mine, a journalist from South Ossetia, wrote me this email after she had attended numerous meetings in Europe, describing, as she said, "what really happened in the war".

Many South Ossetians share this view. They see independence and unification with North Ossetia – a controversial approach, given that North Ossetia is a member of the Russian Federation – as the only way to survive the pressure and threat coming from the Georgians.

Abkhazia, according to many experts, has more possibilities for survival as an independent state than does South Ossetia, thanks to its favourable location near the Black Sea and its subtropical climate. The Abkhaz, unlike Ossetians, do not even discuss unification with Russia. For them, the years after the 1992-1993 war have been all about state-building. What seems to the outside world as Russian backing, nearing annexation, has been realpolitik for the Abkhaz:

"The Abkhaz have always felt that it is easier to cope with Russians than Georgians,"

says Donald Rayfield, an expert on Georgia and Emeritus Professor of Modern Languages at Queen Mary, University of London.⁶⁵

In this section, I will consider how South Ossetia and Abkhazia are described in the stories by seeing what kind of attributes they are given. My assumption is that, for most readers of mass circulation newspapers, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are unknown places. Therefore, it is the job of journalists to describe them. I was especially interested in the appearance of the term “separatist/separatism”, as opposed to the legal term “*de facto*”. “Separatism”, like “terrorism”, is a disputed term. Many experts refrain from using the term, since it is considered pejorative. As one South Ossetian journalist told me, when I asked her to cooperative with Georgian journalists on a project:

“We don’t mind working with them, if you can find people that don’t think that we are just brainless separatists” ...

7.10.1. Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008

Figures 45, 46 and 47 show how *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008:

Attributes to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in New York Times in August 2008, times/attribute

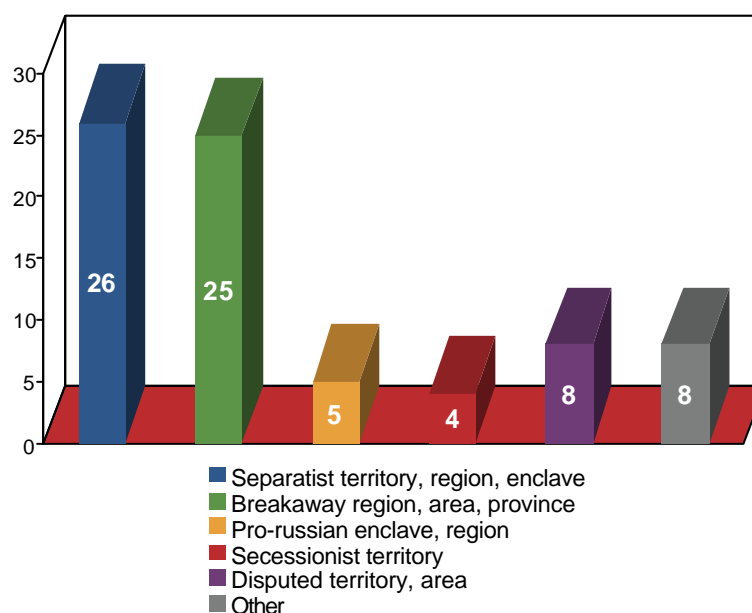


Figure 45 N=42 stories

⁶⁵ Interview, March 21 2009.

In August 2008, *The New York Times* most often called Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia “breakaway territories”. This term appeared in 36% of the stories. Secondly, the paper used the term “breakaway region”, a slightly more neutral term. Other terms used are “pro-Russian enclave”, “secessionist territory”, “disputed territory” and others, such as “desolate no man’s land”, “mountainous rebel province”, “secessionist territories”, “Russian proxies”, and “Georgia’s enclaves”.

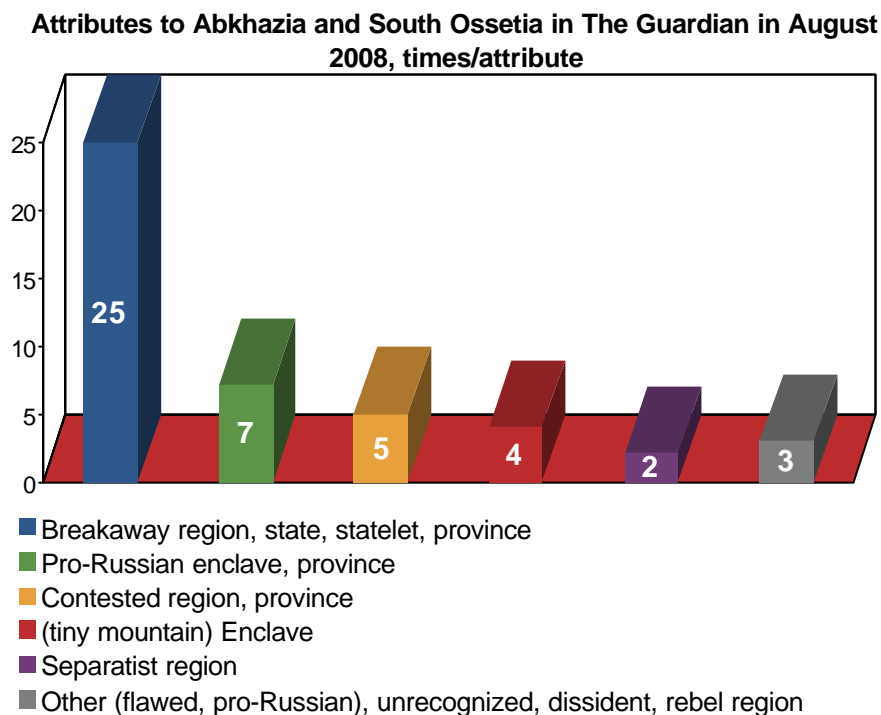


Figure 46 N=35 stories

The most frequently used description of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by *The Guardian* is “breakaway region” (or state, statelet or province). Secondly, the regions appear as “pro-Russian” enclaves or provinces. The paper also uses the term “contested region”, or simply “enclave”. The phrase “separatist region” appears only twice in the text.

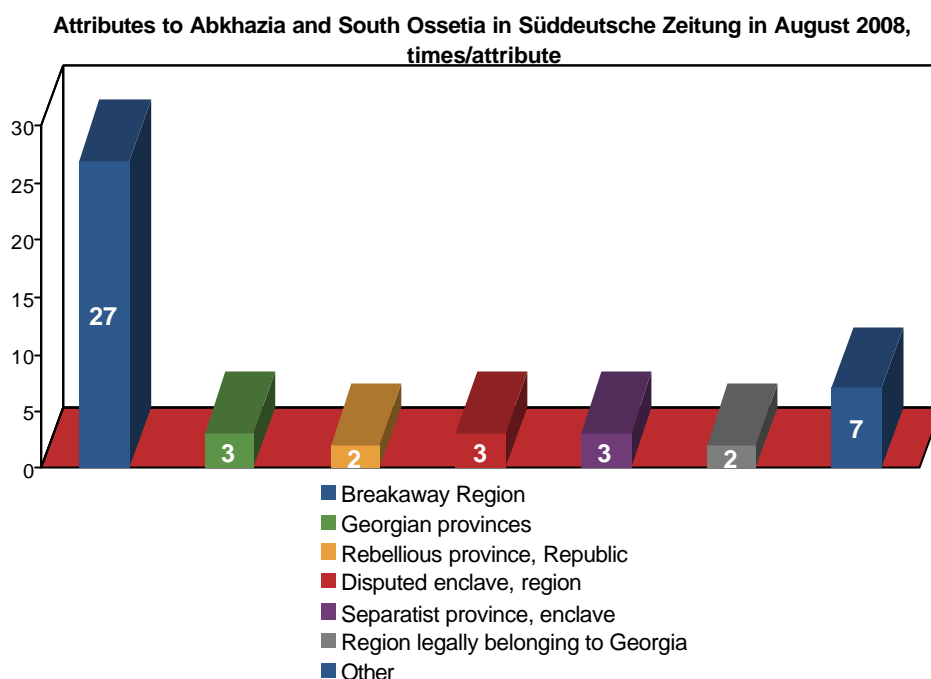


Figure 47 N=40 stories

The phrase “breakaway region” is the most common description of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* mentions it in 56% of all stories, while others, such as “Georgian province”, “rebellious province”, “disputed enclave”, “separatist province” and “region legally belonging to Georgia” appear far less frequently.

7.10.2. *Novaya gazeta*

Novaya gazeta approached Abkhazia and South Ossetia very differently than the other papers, probably because of its Russian-speaking readership. The paper seemed to assume that its readers will know what and where South Ossetia is. With a few exceptions, the paper used the word “South Ossetia” without any description of the status of the region. The paper even mentions the “Georgian-South Ossetian border” without explanation, as if this is a border of two equal areas.

The only attributes that the paper used are “rebel republics” (twice), “separatist regions of Georgia”, “breakaway republics” and “unrecognized republics”. In most of the cases, however, these are quotes from the Western press or Western organizations. The paper seems to refrain from defining what Abkhazia and South Ossetia really “are”.

Interestingly, there are also several cases where the paper refers to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as being part of Georgia. For instance, a story, analysing the beginning of the war and its reason, contained the following:

“Putin told the government to develop the means to provide material support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, that legally denied the sovereignty of the Georgian state” (Novaya gazeta August 14 2008).

In some cases, *Novaya gazeta* explains the situation in more detail; for instance, in a story headlined “Four-sided aggression” from August 10:

“This war has not two, not three, but four participating sides: Russia, Georgia, the authorities of South Ossetia, that turned into the shareholders of a KGB joint venture that makes money from fighting Georgia, and the people of South Ossetia who - despite their small number remaining - are forced to choose between Saakashvili, that shelled Tskhinval/i with “Grad” rockets, and Kokoiti, that has turned into a South Ossetian Arafat”.

7.10.3. Descriptions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2004 and 2006

In 2004, *The New York Times* called Abkhazia and South Ossetia either “separatist regions” or “breakaway regions” in most of its stories. It also used terms such as “tiny self-declared republic”, “renegade republic”, *‘de facto* state”, “Georgian province” and “secessionist province”. However, in 2006, the paper used more imagination in describing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although, again, the most common way to put it was to call the areas “breakaway regions” (65 % of the stories) , while the phrase “separatist region” appeared in 20% of all stories. There were also ten other ways of describing the two regions, most peculiar of which was definitely “independent state”. That term appeared in a story quoting the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov.

In one of the analyzed stories, the paper seeks to explain to its readers what an unrecognized state is:

“What exactly are these places? The answers, always passionate, depend on who is asked. Nations? States? Ethnic statelets? Offshore investment regions, away from the eyes and reach of regulators? Lawless zones for black marketeers, fugitives and terrorists?” (The New York Times, August 20 2006)

Here, it becomes clear, that according to the journalist, criminality is an integral part of life in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In 2004, *The Guardian* again used the phrase “breakaway region” as the most common description of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the phrase “separatist region” appears almost as often as “breakaway region”. In 2006, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were defined more neutrally than in 2004, in most cases again as “breakaway regions” but also as “disputed territories” or “self-declared territories”.

In 2004, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* used the term “breakaway region” in most of the cases. However, the paper also mentioned “separatist region” and used terms, such as “tiny internationally unrecognized region that legally belongs to Georgia”. In 2006,

“breakaway region” was again the most common way to describe Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, in 2006, the terms “separatists” or “pro-Russian” did not appear at all.

In 2004, *Novaya gazeta* used, unlike any other paper, the names “Samachablo”⁶⁶ and “South Ossetian rayon”, both of which are used only by Georgians. Otherwise, the paper used “self-declared republic”, “conflict region” and “criminal enclave”. The tone of *Novaya gazeta* in summer 2004 was pro-Georgian, at least in its manner of describing South Ossetia. In 2006, the paper used “unrecognized republics” most often, but referred also to it as a “self-declared republic” and “expelled state”.

7.10.4. “*De facto*” vs “separatists”

The word *de facto* comes from Latin and means “actually”, “indeed”; or “in fact”. In legal practice, this term is known to mean a state of affairs that must be accepted for all practical purposes, but that is illegal or illegitimate.⁶⁷

I was interested in seeing how the terms “*de facto*”, on the one hand, and “separatism/separatists”, on the other, were used in the newspapers. My interest arose from my own experience of dealing with South Ossetian and Abkhazian officials and ordinary people. In their minds, “*de facto*”, was an acceptable way to refer to the current state of their territories. On the other hand, they deeply opposed the use of the term “separatist”.

⁶⁶ South Ossetia was renamed “Samachablo” by Georgians during the 1991-92 conflict. South Ossetians do not accept the term.

⁶⁷ See the definition of “*de facto*”, for instance at <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/De+facto>.

Figure 48 shows how many times the terms “separatism” and “separatists” appeared in each newspaper each year. The figures show the exact amounts, not percentages, and that is why these were considerably lower in 2006 and 2004, when the overall number of stories was less. However, it is clear that *The New York Times* has been the keenest of all papers in using the term. “Separatist” is a term that Georgian officials use frequently when talking about Abkhaz and South Ossetian. *The New York Times’* uncritical use of the term can possibly be explained the US’ political support of Georgia following the Rose Revolution:

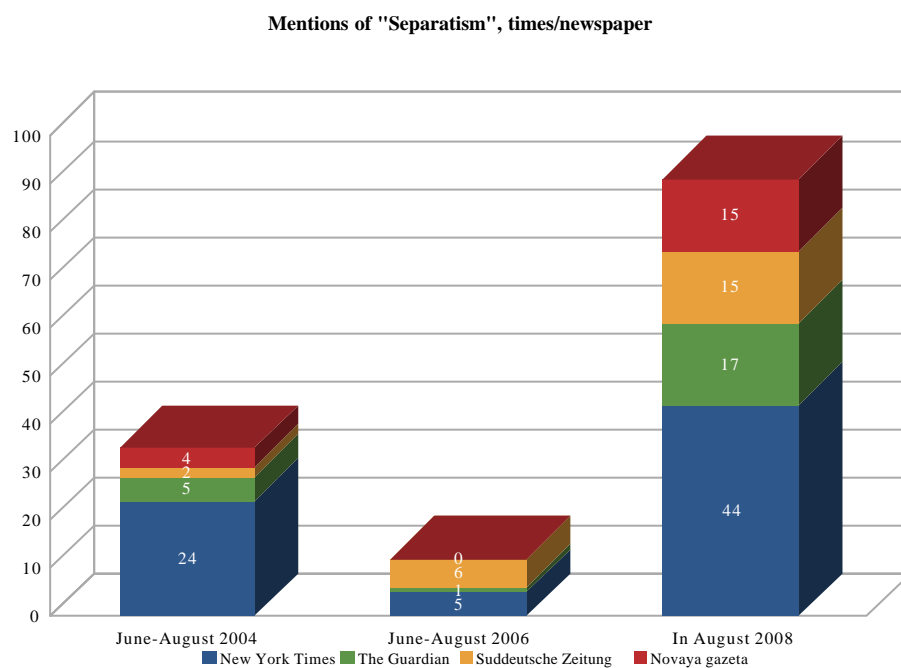


Figure 48

N (2004) = 17 (*The New York Times*), 10 (*The Guardian*), 14 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), 9 (*Novaya gazeta*)

N (2006) = 21 (*The New York Times*), 9 (*The Guardian*), 9 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), 8 (*Novaya gazeta*)

N (2008) = 42 (*The New York Times*), 35 (*The Guardian*), 40 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), 58 (*Novaya gazeta*)

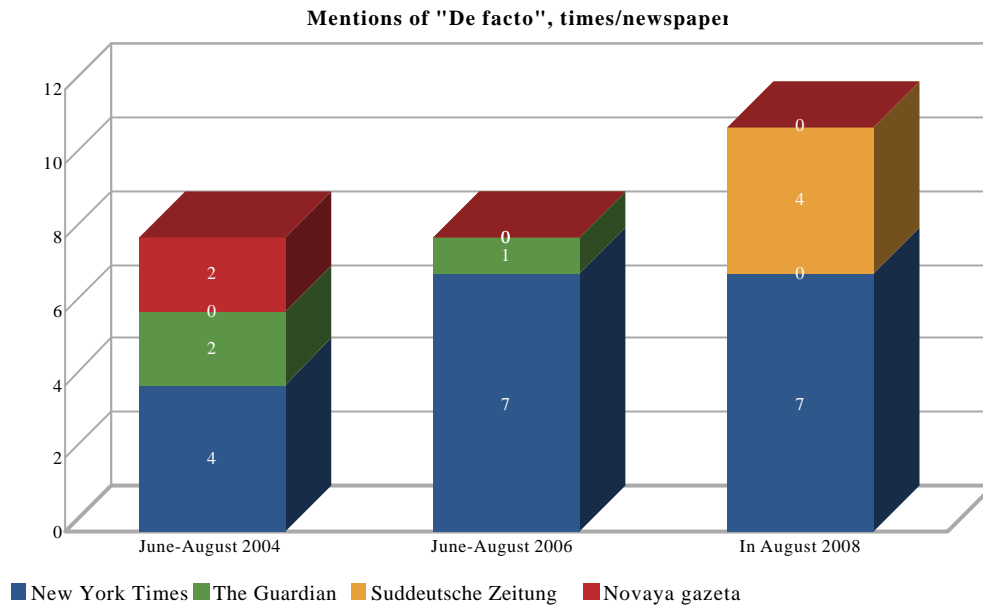


Figure 49

N (2004) = 17 (The New York Times) , 10 (*The Guardian*), 14 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), 9 (*Novaya gazeta*)

N (2006) = 21 (The New York Times), 9 (*The Guardian*), 9 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) , 8 (*Novaya gazeta*)

N (2008) = 42 (The New York Times), 35 (*The Guardian*), 40 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), 58 (*Novaya gazeta*)

Figure 49 shows that that term “*de facto*” appeared far less often than the term “separatist”. Each paper used it only a few times to refer to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Secondly, the regions are depicted as “pro-Russian” enclaves or provinces. The papers also used the word “contested region”, or simply “enclave”. “Separatist region” appears only twice in the texts.

7.10.5. Empirical Results for Subchapter 7.10.

In 2008, 2006 and 2004, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were most often called “breakaway territories” or “separatist regions”. *The New York Times* used the phrase “separatist regions” more often than the other papers.

Other names used by the papers, such as “pro-Russian enclave”, “secessionist territory”, “disputed territory”, “desolate no man’s land”, “mountainous rebel province”, “Russian proxy”, “Georgia’s enclave”, “rebellious province” evoke an image of isolated, wild places under Russian rule, somewhere up in the mountains.

In very few cases do the papers attempt to explain the legal status of the regions, or provide any background about them.

8. Conclusion

In this research, I explored how Abkhazia and South Ossetia were portrayed in the press during escalations of the conflicts in the region. I wanted to know whose voice is heard when papers report on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and whether the PR and propaganda efforts of both Russia and Georgia ended up on the pages of four newspapers. The question related to the August 2008 conflict was whether the coverage of the conflict were biased in any way. An analysis of certain words and concepts, and the use of historical analogies, aimed at uncovering these potential biases. Finally, I analyzed how the papers describe Abkhazia and South Ossetia: are the regions perceived simply as pro-Russian separatist areas, or more legitimate, *de facto* states?

My last question was related to the factors affecting the coverage. This part is based largely on interviews with journalists and experts, and some answers are provided at the end of this chapter.

In order to examine the portrayal of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in chapter 6, I considered the *geography of the news*. I found that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are normally covered from Moscow, and journalists seldom have the chance to travel to these territories themselves. Only when something really dramatic happens – such as the war in August 2008 – are journalists able to travel to the regions.

It was, however, characteristic of the war in South Ossetia that there was very little access to the war zone. Only Russian journalists could go there relatively freely. Despite the conflicts, the regions were not perceived as important enough by all of the papers to send their journalists there to cover the news. Abkhazia and South Ossetia – and even Georgia despite its aspirations of integration with the West – remain on the edge of Europe, and also on the edge of the news agenda.

I also examined *the voices that appear in the news*. Unsurprisingly, the voices used by the papers are mostly the official ones. Georgian and Russian officials as well as Western politicians are those issuing statements about the fate of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities do appear in the news as well, but very seldom. This reinforces the assumption that a voice and access to defining oneself are very seldom given to those who are the objects of power. Knowledge

production is always situated somewhere outside the represented objects.⁶⁸ Journalists view Russian, Georgian and “Western” politicians as the right ones to define and explain the issues related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, instead of giving them a voice themselves. This problem, and the journalistic division of the world into “important” and “unimportant”, has long been at the heart of media criticism by the less developed part of the world. Recent years have even witnessed a birth of new media outlets claiming to offer a counter-hegemonic view of the world, and providing “voices for the voiceless”.⁶⁹

It is clear that this choice of voices is partly related to the journalists’ opportunity to travel in the region. The Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities, not to mention the ordinary citizens, are not surrounded by powerful PR machines, and access is often complicated by poor Internet connections and a lack of appropriate resources for providing information to foreign journalists. However, it is the job of journalists to find information, even when it is not as simple as typing a name into Google.

The interesting question, that deserves more research, concentrates on the question of the geographical location of journalists versus the voices that appear in the news versus the editorials and comments that follow this reportage. For instance, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* relied heavily on news agency materials in 2004 and 2006, resulting in relatively “neutral” and non-passionate reportage. In 2008, the paper sent a correspondent to Georgia, which lead to a relatively balanced reporting of the war, combined with the strong opinions of the commentators. Why were most of the commentators so sure that Russia was to blame, when the reporters were doing their best to show how complicated the situation was?

Another issue deserving further research would be to see how the different “voices” appear in different papers. For instance, does the high number of official Russian voices mean that the Russian version of events gets more emphasis than others? This does not seem to be the case here. Politicians are used as sources for quotes, but different interpretations of what these quotes mean are left to the commentators.

Chapter 7 concentrated on the *language of news*. I examined the propaganda efforts of Georgia and Russia around the conflicts in order to see whether they ended up on the pages of the papers. I also searched for certain terms, such as “democracy” and

⁶⁸ Inka Salovaara-Moring: The East as an Object of Governance: Journalism and Spaces of Power. *Aether, the Journal of Media Geography*, Vol IV, March 2009, pp 85-101.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, James Painter: *Counter-Hegemonic News: A case study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford 2008.

“aggression”, and assessed how Abkhazia and South Ossetia are normally described in the news.

Some of the results proved surprising. They showed that even liberally-oriented papers sometimes sing the patriotic song and follow the agenda set by the politicians. A clear example was *The New York Times*’ use of Cold War comparisons. The term “Cold War” appeared in 43% of the stories about Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the August 2008 data. On most occasions, the term “Cold War” appeared in a quote from Western politicians, implicating that the elites believe that the Cold War has returned. It is notable that *Novaya gazeta* did not mention the “Cold War” at all in the August 2008 data, despite the fact that Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev did use the term at that time.

Also, the analysis of how the terms “aggression” and “democracy” were used in the papers produced some interesting results. All of the papers were unanimous in writing that the aggressor was Russia, despite Russia claiming the opposite. None of the papers explained to their readers what “aggression” really means in terms of international law. It was also clear to all the papers that Georgia is a “democracy”: all the papers, with the exception of *Novaya gazeta*, used the term often in their stories and referred to Georgia as a democracy – again, without bothering to explain what “democracy” in this case means.

These results show that there was a certain pro-Georgian bias in the papers with regard to the war of August 2008; however, it was neither systematic nor deliberate. Journalists had little access to the South Ossetian side of the conflict, and many Western politicians were very quick to condemn Russia.

“*Our job is to trust our sources*”, declared a senior journalist at one of the Reuters Institute’s weekly seminars. But what if the source is emotional and prejudiced?

Also, journalism loves dichotomies. Cold War comparisons are a perfect dichotomy. The war in Georgia was full of dichotomies: big and small, David and Goliath, democratic and undemocratic, Western-oriented and hostile towards the West – the list is almost endless. But it needs to be said that, to the journalists’ credit, apart from the black and white, they tried to look for the grey shades as well. Particularly those papers that had correspondents on both sides could balance their stories. One journalist seeing refugees flooding into Georgia needs to be balanced by another seeing a similar flow of ethnic Ossetian refugees flooding into North Ossetia in Russia. Both stories need to be told, and, in some cases, the journalists managed to do

so. Another question arising from reading the stories was whether the journalists tried to understand and analyze the situation. In most of the news stories, there is no room for deep analysis. It was also surprising to see how few times the papers referred to the history of the conflict. The name “Zviad Gamsahurdia” appeared very seldom in the papers. Some papers leave it up to the columnists and editors to draw conclusions – however, the editors and columnists did not always understand the situation well enough. One of the editors whom I interviewed in the course of my research called the coverage of the August war, “*a toxic combination of ignorance, laziness and a smooth PR campaign*”.⁷⁰

Was it really as bad as that?

Yes, it was, and no, it was not.

Yes; in many cases, the journalists gave the Georgian – and Russian – PR machines an easy ride. Cold War metaphors flourished, and Russia was depicted as the ruthless aggressor. At the same time, the Russian propaganda of 2000 victims was accepted very easily, as if the journalists smelled blood.

No; as demonstrated by other research on the subject, there is more pluralism in the media than we sometimes realize. All of the papers analyzed gave coverage to different, even contradicting opinions. There was no anti-Russian or pro-Georgian conspiracy there – personal sympathies indeed could be found, but no systematic pattern of distortion.

The problem with researching bias in the media lies not only in the fact that the concept itself assumes that there is a “truth” out there and that this “truth” can be reported in an unbiased way;⁷¹ another problem lies in the fact that often the things that are left unreported can play an important role. Finally, every sentence we speak or write is a choice. Putting it this way, everything in the media is biased in one way or another. The famous journalist and author, Nick Davies, depicts in his book *Flat Earth News*, the patterns that are characteristic of today’s papers that aim at making profit, often at the cost of quality reporting:

*“You can see the patterns in here: the arbitrary and the irrational replacing of real judgements; the casual recycling of unreliable claims; and the structural bias towards the political and moral beliefs of the most powerful groups in society”.*⁷²

⁷⁰ Interview with Alistair Burnett, producer of BBC’s “World Tonight”, December 11th, 2008.

⁷¹ Paul Trowler: *Investigating Mass Media*. Second Edition. Collins Educational, London 1996.

⁷² Nick Davies: *Flat Earth News*. Vintage books, London 2009. P. 152.

At the same time, Davies reminds us that there is not necessarily a conspiracy in action – simply the changes in the newspaper business. This is very true with regard to the coverage of the Russo-Georgian war: there was no conspiracy but there were factors affecting the coverage.

At least the following factors emerged from my data:

- **Individual journalists' preferences.** The traditions of Western journalists obliges us to separate facts from opinions¹ however, covering a war would be impossible if one did not feel sympathy for the civilians' suffering during a conflict.⁷³ The best way to cover a war in a balanced way is, therefore, quite simply to have journalists covering both sides. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, journalists rarely get to travel to the regions unless there is a war – and often not even then. In fortuitous cases, when a journalist is invited to a conference⁷⁴ or to work for an NGO,⁷⁵ he/she is able to send reports as well, but the way in which small, little-known conflicts end up on the pages of the papers is clearly quite arbitrary.

- **Editors** play a role as well. It is up to them to decide how much weight a story is given and what is the deadline. As a senior BBC producer commented:

*“All of the correspondents on the ground knew what was going on and the coverage was very good. However, in some cases, there were problems with editors who did not understand the whole situation”.*⁷⁶

In short, if the editor does not think the issue is important, it will appear in the news as unimportant. If the editor feels that ‘Russia is back’, then these three words will end up in the headline. This is what brings the much-criticized “conspiracy” thinking of some critical media researches into question: there definitely seems to be some kind of a pattern of consensus-thinking among more senior journalists.

- **Needs of technology and other structural issues.** If today's newspaper reader sees in his morning paper that a war has broken out and wants to know more about it, what does he/she do? Go online, of course. The amount of time that

⁷³ Interview with Tim Whewell, December 4th, 2008.

⁷⁴ *The Economist's* Balkan correspondent, Tim Judah, was invited to a conference in Georgia in 2007, and managed to talk his editor into sending him to South Ossetia and Abkhazia at the same time.

⁷⁵ *The Guardian's* Conor Foley spent several weeks in the Caucasus in the summer of 2006, running workshops for the Norwegian Refugee Council.

⁷⁶ Interview with Alistair Burnett, December 11th, 2008.

journalists have to file their stories is sometimes incredibly limited. During a war, the situation becomes even more impossible: war means chaos, propaganda and overwhelming emotions. And what about the 24-hour news channels, such as BBC 24 or CNN? When fresh pictures are needed no less frequently than every few hours, and experts and politicians are needed constantly, is there time for a serious journalist's judgement on who should be given a voice on a live talk show, especially when, on the one side, there is an English-speaking president who wants to go on air, and, on the other, there is an unreachable president who cannot speak English?

In this sense, a lot depends on the structures. X amount of things happen daily in the world, the paper has Y amount of room for news and Z amount of room for comments. TV and radio have their own issues – certain regular programmes with a need for new, interesting content. As Tim Whewell commented, the first journalist to enter South Ossetia after the war unaccompanied by the authorities:

“A lot depends on structures. The reason I went to South Ossetia really was that the World Service Radio needs a certain amount of programmes and they agreed to send me there, though they were opposing it in the beginning. So it really had nothing to do with the World Service seeing South Ossetia as something important and worth reporting”.

On the other hand, the appearance of 24-hour news channels has vastly altered the way in which those in power behave and regard their role in crisis situations. The appearance of cheap portable devices, such as mobile phones, has made it possible for citizens to monitor events in real time, thus challenging the whole concept of “public trust”, when the authorities communicate their mediated versions of events to the people.⁷⁷

In the case of the August 2008 war, the role of citizen journalism was minimal, due to the problem of accessing the area, but some mobile phone videos made by soldiers did impart some valuable information about what really happened in the combat zone.

- **Propaganda efforts combined with old prejudices**

The Georgian PR machine started sending faxes to the large Western media outlets shortly after the war broke out.⁷⁸ The Georgians spoke fluent English, and Mikheil Saakashvili was always available for an interview with the international media.

⁷⁷ Nik Gowing: *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism publication, Oxuniprint, Oxford 2009.

⁷⁸ Interview with Olexiy Solohubenko, November 20th, 2008.

Russia did its best on this front as well: it had generals and military experts ready to comment, and press conferences in Moscow would start early enough in the morning for the Western channels to use them in that day's news broadcasts.⁷⁹ The Russians had apparently learnt their lesson from the wars in Chechnya, during which blocking journalists from getting information from the official sources lead the journalists to seek alternative sources, the Chechens themselves, making it difficult for the Russian authorities to justify their actions to the Russian public;⁸⁰ but Georgia was more efficient, and, most importantly, offered access to places like Gori. As an employee of the Georgian Ministry of the Interior, Shota Utiashvili, commented to the BBC:

*"In a conflict where you have a huge power against a small state, I think that's almost as important as the military battle. ... and the only tactic you can [use to] respond to [such allegations] is to say to the journalists: 'Go ahead and see for yourselves'. At some point, journalists had access to South Ossetia, but then they were blocked. And Georgia was giving full access to everybody and Russia was giving almost none, except for these prearranged media tours ..."*⁸¹

Utiashvili gave 1,100 interviews during the war. At the same time, the Brussels-based PR consultant company, Aspect, mobilized its PR machine as well – producing dozens of press releases and accepting hundreds of media calls per day. After the war, Aspect representatives were quite open in discussing their media strategy, whereas the Russian government's PR company in Brussels, G-Plus, was far more cautious. When BBC journalists tried to investigate their relationship with the Kremlin, the company spokesperson, Hans Kribbe, said that he could not speak on record.

- **National “agendas”**

In my research, I concentrated on whether the newspapers reflected the official views of their respective countries; some interesting issues arose from the content analysis of the August 2008 war reportage.

Firstly, *The New York Times* clearly supported Georgia more than the other papers researched. This emerged from its Cold War comparisons, framing of “aggression” and other issues. The paper also gave room to numerous American “friends of

⁷⁹ Interview with Caroline Wyatt, December 8th, 2008.

⁸⁰ Elena Koltsova: “Change in the Coverage of Chechen Wars: Reasons and Consequences”. *The Public*, Vol 7, issue 3, 2000, pp 39-54.

⁸¹ Transcript of a BBC World Service programme about PR Wars, November 2008.

Georgia”, such as senator John McCain. However, as time passed, the paper started to devote more room to a balanced analysis of the situation, although the outside experts writing for the paper still included famous pro-Georgian academics, such as Svante Cornell, from the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in Stockholm.

Secondly, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was surprisingly anti-Russian, especially in its editorials, despite the fact that Germany is perceived as enjoying a special relationship with Russia, reflecting their mutual (energy) interests.

The Guardian aimed at balance, despite the British politicians’ condemnation of and demands to punish Russia. The paper seemed to possess no special “national agenda”. *Novaya gazeta*, for its part, provided a multi-faceted and balanced view of the conflict, despite the fact that Russia was involved in the warfare. This seems to contradict the common perception that the Russian press lacks freedom.⁸² It should be noted, however, that *Novaya gazeta* represents a marginal slice of the Russian press – that that is critical of the Kremlin. Choosing almost any other national Russian daily as a research object would have produced entirely different results. As stated previously in Chapter 3, *Novaya gazeta*’s journalism does not conceal the identity of its journalists. When reporting a war, they could write “it (=Russia) is wrong, but it is my country” – highlighting the difficulty of balancing truth-telling and evident national sentiments when witnessing one’s own country at war.

⁸² Reporter’s Without Border’s Press Freedom Index 2008 places Russia as 141st out of 173 countries. http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=29031

Epilogue

What did change from 2004 and 2006, then?

A lot did change. The war changed fundamentally the international relations in the South Caucasus, mostly by increasing the Russian influence, reducing US engagement and, subsequently, increasing the EU's role in the region.⁸³

Thanks to the Russian involvement in the war, Abkhazia and South Ossetia stopped being small, forgotten, exotic corners of the world and received a new role as Russian-backed rebel republics that are there to disturb the world order of early twenty-first century. Their existence was confirmed on the pages of the papers, and, every now and then, their representatives got to speak, but, as a whole, exactly as before, the war reportage was not about South Ossetia, but about Russians and Georgians killing each other on the soil of the tiny unrecognized republic. *“They do not fit into the wider picture”*, one interviewed journalist told me. The Balkans did fit, Gaza indeed does fit, and even Chechnya fits the picture far better than the problems of the South Caucasus.

The well-established expert on Abkhazia and participant in multiple peace-building initiatives, Professor Paula Garb, writes:

*“Missing from most international and Georgian sources about the August events is any discussion about what keeps the South Ossetians and Abkhazians from agreeing to be part of Georgia. If this question is raised, the answer usually focuses on Russia as the primary obstacle, as though the Abkhazians or South Ossetians have no opinion of their own”.*⁸⁴

Today, even some Georgian politicians are ready to admit in private conversations that Georgia has lost these two territories forever. Many experts are also convinced that giving into these territorial ambitions would be for the best for Georgia – after all, there are successful precedents in Europe, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia. However, in a country with hundreds of thousands of IDPs and a hurt national pride, saying this out loud at this time would be a political suicide:

“The reason why Saakashvili can keep on lying is that everybody still believes, that it was all Russia's fault. Admitting the truth would hit some deeply rooted national myths in Georgia, such as that the myth of the government being wise

⁸³ Neil Macfarlane's lecture at Tbilisi State University, May 13th, 2009. Summary at <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2009/05/prof-neil-macfarlane-on-august-war-and.html>.

⁸⁴ Paula Garb: The View from Abkhazia of South Ossetia Ablaze. Central Asian Survey (forthcoming).

*and doing what is best for the people and the myth of Georgians being great warriors”.*⁸⁵

One interviewed expert even said that the war was a relief for the West: now nothing needs to be done but wait and see. However, Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain in limbo – and, after Russian recognition, the situation has become even more complicated. When it comes to journalism, today, there is very little coverage of Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The war is over and the “statelets” have returned to their sleepy, everyday life. At the same time, Georgia is undergoing a worsening political crisis, triggered partly by the war, while Western journalists struggle to maintain their jobs in the worsening crisis of the newspaper industry. It is unlikely that the coverage of “distant” conflicts, such as those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, will improve⁸⁶ – but we could always give it a try.

⁸⁵ Interview with Giorgi Khelashvili, November 27th, 2008.

⁸⁶ Salla Nazarenko: Journalistit ja Georgian sota: tietämättömyyttä, PR:ää ja matkustusrajoituksia (Journalists and the war in Georgia: Ignorance, PR and Travel restrictions) in Auli Harju (ed) : *Journalismikritiikin vuosikirja 2009 (The Yearbook of Journalism Critics)*, University of Tampere, 2009.

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