

Georgia: Simulating War Or Provoking It?

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On the evening of March 13 Georgia's Imedi television channel ran a 30-minute prime time "simulated" newscast about a Russian invasion of the South Caucasus nation complete with a report that the country's mercurial (if not megalomaniacal) president – Mikheil Saakashvili – had been assassinated.

The show was aired "by the Imedi TV's weekly program Special Report, which started just a couple of minutes before 8pm – the time when Imedi TV runs its usual news bulletin Kronika." (Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from Civil Georgia reports of March 14, 2010.)

The Special Report's regular news anchor, Natia Koberidze, opened the program with the words: "Have you ever thought about the end of Georgian statehood? Probably yes, because we have already seen this threat in the summer of 2008."

The reference was to the five-day war fought between Georgia and Russia after the first launched an all-out assault on neighboring South Ossetia on August 8, killing hundreds of civilians and scores of Russian soldiers stationed there.

As the Georgian newscaster herself pointed out its significance and as past is assuredly prologue in the current context, some information on the 2008 war in the South Caucasus is justified.

The attack itself followed several days of deadly shelling of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali by Georgian artillery, which in turn followed by one day the completion of the Immediate Response 2008 NATO military exercises which included the participation of 1,200 U.S. troops, the largest deployment the Pentagon has ever made to Georgia. Some of them – and their equipment – remained in Georgia after the August 8 Georgian invasion of South Ossetia and throughout the conflict.

Britain was to have conducted war games in the country the next month, Georgian Express 2008, until the war intervened to prevent them.

Weeks before the war broke out the U.S. sent 400 Marine Corps-trained Georgian troops to Afghanistan in addition to the 2,000 that were in Iraq, the third largest national contingent in the latter country at the time.

As soon as the invasion of South Ossetia and the resulting war with Russia had commenced, the Georgian commander in Iraq, Colonel Bondo Maisuradze, announced: "Georgia will remove all of its 2,000 soldiers from Iraq to join the fighting in the breakaway province of South Ossetia as soon as transport can be arranged." [1]

Georgian troops were brought home on U.S. military transport planes while the fighting raged.

It was reported at the time that “First-line Georgian soldiers wear NATO uniforms, kevlar helmets and body armour matching US issue, and carry the US-manufactured M-16 automatic rifle....” [2] Less than two weeks after the war ended the U.S. sent the first of three warships to Georgian ports on the Black Sea.

The beginning of the March 13 Georgian broadcast notified viewers that what was to follow could occur “if Georgian society is not brought together against Russia’s plans.”

But “in the course of the report itself the TV station carried no sign on the screen indicating that the report was fake.”

Anyone tuning in to the program after the formal disclaimer or alerted to the newscast by others saw footage of Russian tanks and warplanes apparently attacking and invading Georgia which – given the time slot of the program and its announcer – would have led any unwarned viewers to believe that what they were watching was occurring in real time.

The full lead-in to the program was as politically charged and partisan, both in regards to Russia and South Ossetia on one hand and to Georgian internal politics on the other, as could be scripted. “Russia’s tactics against Georgia become more and more dangerous. The occupying force is vigorously searching for and is finding a foothold within the Georgian political spectrum.

“We want to offer you a simulated, special bulletin of Kronika. Our viewers and invited guests [in the Special Report program’s studio] will see a news bulletin of probably the toughest day for Georgia, which takes into view those threats which politicians and experts are discussing regularly; [a news bulletin about] how events may develop if society is not consolidated against Russia’s plans. Let’s see a news bulletin about the worst future.”

The program featured a video clip of Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, at one point pounding clenched fists together (though with a relaxed and even benign expression on his face), with a voice-over translation in Georgian in which he is identified as having ordered his nation’s forces “to neutralize the threat coming from Saakashvili.”

Later, as though it was a delayed crosscut, a scene is shown of U.S. President Barack Obama at a podium outside the White House (what appears to be a Rose Garden briefing) with Vice President Joseph Biden behind him to his right.

The Imedi news anchor who followed Natia Koberidze (who opens and closes the feature) announced, as though it was an urgent, breaking development, that Obama “is just making a statement; here is live footage,” and the Georgian-language voice-over had him demanding that Russia “stop the military campaign” against Georgia.

The male anchor then revealed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was “on her way to Moscow.”

Not to spare Georgian viewers any shocking sensationalism, the announcer spoke of the “assassination of President Saakashvili,” which news was “disseminated by Nogaideli’s

party.” The last allusion is to the Movement for Fair Georgia, headed by former prime minister and current opposition figure Zurab Nogaideli who had visited Moscow last December and met with among other Russian officials Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The false newscast at one point mentions that internal unrest in Georgia and Russian aggression against the nation “focused on the post-local election period, sometime in early June, 2010,” a detail easy to miss while watching scenes of Russian tanks, jeeps and troops advancing on the capital and warplanes ominously piercing the sky.

The timing is not fortuitous. Local elections are planned in May and anti-Russian hysteria serves more than one purpose for the Saakashvili regime.

A Civil Georgia report on the program said: “[T]he opposition, allegedly led by Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Nogaideli – the two politicians who have recently met with Russia’s PM Vladimir Putin – protests against local election results; Russia uses [the] unrest in Georgia and intervenes militarily. The fake report culminated with an announcement about President Saakashvili’s ‘assassination’ and ‘clashes’ in the outskirts of Tbilisi.

It can be said of Nino Burjanadze, head of the Democratic Movement-United Georgia, what Anatole France wrote of a French commander during the Hundred Years War: He had many friends among his enemies and many enemies among his friends; he fought now for his own side, now against it, but always for his own advantage; for the rest he was no worse than his fellows, and one of the least stupid.

She has twice served as interim head of state in Georgia. For a two-month period during the so-called Rose Revolution from November 23, 2003 to January 25, 2004 and from November 25, 2007 to January 20, 2008 when Saakashvili stepped down to run for reelection.

Burjanadze has been a major proponent of her nation joining NATO; in fact since the Imedi broadcast of March 13 she had criticised Saakashvili for perhaps permanently jeopardizing Georgia’s membership prospects.

In the fake newscast she is portrayed as little better than a Russian agent who meets with troops who mutiny against Saakashvili and who with Nogaideli and other opposition leaders establishes a “people’s government” after the standing government is evacuated from the capital.

The Imedi anchor announced that Burjanadze and Nogaideli arrived in the capital of South Ossetia after an attempt on the life of its president, Eduard Kokoity, and “along with the Russian authorities, they also blamed the Georgian authorities for organizing the attack on Kokoity.”

Voice-overs for both opposition leaders are fabricated to support the above claims.

That is, they are guilty of the grossest treason: Collaborating with an invading power and betraying their nation and its government under fire.

That impression, however much criticism of the program may attempt to neutralize it, will carry over into the May elections – or at any rate was intended to – and mar the chances of candidates from the Democratic Movement-United Georgia, the Movement for Fair Georgia and the opposition in general.

As the program was being broadcast, panic ensued among many Georgians and “the number of calls received by an emergency ambulance service increased significantly at the time,” people rushed to withdraw money from automatic teller machines, mobile phone networks crashed and many hurried to flee the capital and towns near the South Ossetian border.

After the newscast ended “the program continued in [the] studio with a large group of invited guests discussing Russia-Georgia relations and potential security threats. Only a few participants of the program spoke out against the fact that Imedi TV did not run a caption saying that the report was fake.”

During and particularly since Saakashvili’s Rose Revolution Georgia has become the political playground – and battleground – of cosmopolite billionaire emigres from several countries, notably George Soros, Boris Berezovsky and the late Badri Patarkatsishvili. The last-named owned Imedi Media Holding, the television station’s parent company, along with Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation.

After showing footage of Saakashvili’s security forces brutalizing demonstrators in early November of 2007, Imedi TV facilities were taken over by government riot police and the Georgian National Communications Commission suspended the station’s broadcast license for three months.

Currently, “Imedi TV’s head is Giorgi Arveladze, former member of the government and a long-time ally of President Saakashvili.”

It is inconceivable that the March 13 program could even have been considered, much less prepared and cleared for broadcasting, without Saakashvili’s authorization. If not on his express orders.

After a backlash began developing in Georgia and internationally, “Many opposition parties made separate statements condemning the Imedi TV’s fake report, alleging that it was done in a prior agreement with the authorities, in particular with President Saakashvili.”

The following day Saakashvili and other government leaders attempted to distance themselves from the broadcast, but what the nation’s president said indicates that the opposition’s accusations are well-founded.

He acknowledged that aspects of the program were, in his word, unpleasant. Not irresponsible. Not inflammatory or reckless. Not dangerous and surely not criminal. Unpleasant.

Yet he added: “But the major unpleasant thing about yesterday’s report – and I want everyone to realize it well – was that this report is maximally close to reality and maximally close to what may really happen, or to what Georgia’s enemy keeps in mind.”

That enemy, he said, began “a real bad movie” in August of 2008, “but we stopped this movie.

“Although we know that its director is still writing a script for a scenario which is close to what we saw yesterday.”

The above is anything but a disavowal. It is a transparent endorsement.

“Saakashvili also mentioned Nino Burjanadze, ex-parliamentary speaker and a leader of the Democratic Movement-United Georgia party, who has recently met with Russia’s PM Vladimir Putin. Burjanadze and Zurab Nogaideli, ex-PM and leader of the Movement for Fair Georgia party, who met separately with PM Putin, were part of the Imedi TV’s fake report according to which they were key organizers of unrest in Tbilisi after the local elections, which was then followed by a Russian invasion.”

If Burjanadze, Nogaideli or any of their supporters are assaulted – or far worse – by nationalist extremists the blood will be on Saakashvili’s hands.

Burjanadze directly accused Saakashvili of organizing a “terrorist act against his people.” She added that she would continue to pursue an ongoing legal action against him. “The lawsuit, which I filed eight months ago, was about groundless allegations against me, according to which I was a spy of Russia, sponsored from Russia and so on and so forth. I am sure that the next lawsuit will be put on the shelf again. However, I am not going to stop my activities.” [3]

On March 14 demonstrators, including members of Georgian opposition parties, gathered outside the Imedi TV building. “Some protesters were lashing out at some of the program’s guests, criticizing them for not speaking out against the fake report while participating in the discussion in the studio after the report was aired.” [4]

On March 15 Georgia’s six main opposition parties released a joint statement which called for continuing “a dialogue with Russia for normalization of the two countries’ relations and Georgia’s peaceful unification.”

The statement also said:

“The staged report of the Imedi television channel was an informational terror act against Georgia’s people committed by Mikhail Saakashvili to keep his power.

“This program posed a threat to the health of people, their peace of mind and life.” [5]

On the same day, however, Saakashvili’s political crony and Imedi head Giorgi Arveladze echoed his boss’s tone: “Our objective was not to scare society but to show the dangers facing our country.” [6]

The U.S. ambassador to the country, John Bass, issued an obligatory criticism of the program as “irresponsible,” but his characterization of its effect was far milder than what it would have been if the situation was reversed and Russian television had broadcast a comparable incitement to hysteria and violence: “It’s not in keeping with what we would consider standards of professional journalism.”

The mayor of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi was less retrained in his response. Gigi Ugulava said “It is unacceptable to terrify people...in difficult conditions with irresponsibility. It can’t be allowed. To be a journalist is a big responsibility. Spreading shocking and untrue

information like this is unacceptable.” [7]

Nino Burjanadze’s Democratic Movement-United Georgia announced the day after the broadcast that it had initiated a lawsuit against Imedi. A spokesman for the party said that its attorney “has been working over the lawsuit since yesterday and [it] will be brought to a court of law soon. This will be a criminal lawsuit as Imedi’s actions have gone beyond administrative offences.” [8]

On the same day Shalva Natelashvili, leader of the opposition Georgian Labor Party, demanded the immediate closing of the station and urged “the UN Security Council to hold a special session in the framework of the Hague Tribunal and assign a special group for punishing those persons who were propagandizing war on Saturday evening.” [9]

Vice Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Paata Davitaia, in promising a parliamentary investigation into the matter, said that the program was a direct violation of the law in three regards: By portraying members of the Georgian armed forces as traitors, by staging fake interviews with members of the diplomatic corps and by falsely reporting the assassination of the president.

Christian Democratic members of parliament also condemned the broadcast as a violation of the law. [10]

The responses from Russia and South Ossetia have been along similar lines.

Sergei Markov, a senior State Duma deputy, said “This report appeared months after the Imedi station was taken under Saakashvili’s control, so everything has been agreed [upon] with him,” adding “Hatred toward Russia is Saakashvili’s political agenda, and it is important for him to discredit those who are crossing him by seeking contacts with Russia.” [11]

Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Affairs, spoke in the same vein, stating “I am sure that today’s provocation was initiated by the ruling regime, by Saakashvili.” [12] He also said that Saakashvili was using “the same playbook” he had employed in launching the invasion of South Ossetia in 2008. [13]

Russian ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin also denounced the Imedi program and those behind it: “This was a grandiose provocation as it will leave its trace in Georgia’s public opinion. This means attributing a stable image of [Georgia’s] enemy to Russia and Russians, this means tensions regarding delimitation of borders between Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.” [14]

The spokesman for the country’s Foreign Ministry, Andrei Nesterenko, denounced the program as “irresponsible and immoral” and said, “The provocative TV show has caused tangible damage to security and stability in the region, significantly heightening the intensity of an already complex situation.” [15]

In South Ossetia, the victim of Saakashvili’s last military aggression, on March 13 before the Imedi newscast was shown later in the evening the Special Representative for Post-Conflict Settlement said that Georgian media had fabricated a report of an attack on a Georgian village as a provocation ahead of discussions on the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict scheduled to be held in Geneva on March 18.

Boris Chochiev recalled “that while making a speech at the Royal Institute for International

Affairs in London [on February 17], Georgian President Saakashvili stated a new war in the South Caucasus region is possible and that he would not exclude the probability of a conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.” [16]

On March 15 Chochiev announced that “Near the village of Mejvriskhevi, the movement of a big column of Georgian armed forces arriving from the Georgian town of Gori has been observed.” [17]

South Ossetian Foreign Minister Murat Djioev spoke of the March 13 Imedi program and said, “This was a provocation aggravating the situation and speaks to the fact that Georgian authorities are getting prepared for certain actions, bearing in mind the fact that after the broadcast Georgian armed forces moved towards the boundary line of South Ossetia.” [18]

The nation’s ambassador to Russia, Dmitry Medoev, spoke of the Georgian broadcast and also attributed a menacing motive to it: “It is clearly a ‘pulp’ version for the future. In the opinion of the Georgian authorities, scenes of attacking Russian forces should be a background for and even justification of the prepared future incursion of Georgia into South Ossetia.”

He added that on the eve of the invasion of his country in 2008 Georgian media had portrayed footage of Georgian artillery barrages against South Ossetia as being fired from Russian positions and that “the report broadcast by Imedi demonstrates the readiness of the Georgian media to provide informational support to possible military adventures of the Georgian regime.” [19]

There was nothing simulated, fabricated or fictional about the South Caucasus war of 2008 and there is nothing fake about plans for the next one.

Notes

- 1) Associated Press, August 9, 2008
- 2) Deutsche Presse-Agentur, August 9, 2008
- 3) Itar-Tass, March 15, 2010
- 4) Rustavi 2, March 14, 2010
- 5) Itar-Tass, March 15, 2010
- 6) Russian Information Agency Novosti, March 15, 2010
- 7) Rustavi 2, March 14, 2010
- 8) Russian Information Agency Novosti, March 14, 2010
- 9) Rustavi 2, March 14, 2010
- 10) Ibid
- 11) Moscow Times, March 15, 2010
- 12) Press Trust of India, March 14, 2010
- 13) Moscow Times, March 15, 2010
- 14) Russian Information Agency Novosti, March 15, 2010
- 15) Ibid
- 16) Ministry for Press and Mass Media of the Republic of South Ossetia
March 15, 2010
- 17) Ibid
- 18) Ibid
- 19) Ibid

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