

Conflict and Context: Reporting from the Caucasus

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The war between Russia and Georgia caught most of the world by surprise but it is a conflict that has long been brewing – and one that is part of a larger drama. The bigger context is Russia's move to regain the influence it enjoyed during the Cold War years and American efforts to build energy and security alliances in Russia's backyard. Reports of the events by Russian media and the western press differ greatly. What is really happening in the Caucasus and what does it all mean?

Jon Sawyer is founder and executive director of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, a non-profit organization that funds independent reporting with the intent of raising the standard of media coverage of global affairs. The center works with media outlets across the country to improve coverage of emergent crises that would otherwise go under-reported. Three Pulitzer-funded journalists were in Georgia at the time war broke out, reporting for NewsHour, HDNet and other outlets.

Sawyer has reported from over five dozen countries. His work has been honored by the Overseas Press Club, the Inter-American Press Association and the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He is a three-time winner of the National Press Club's award for best foreign correspondence. Sawyer received a B.A. degree from Yale University and has held fellowships at Princeton and Harvard. In 2006 he reported from South Ossetia and Georgia, contending in an article for Foreign Policy online that U.S. support for the Georgian government was fueling a march toward war.

It's a pleasure for me to be in Houston, and in such distinguished company. I'm reminded of my Washington colleague Cragg Hines, long-time columnist and bureau chief for the *Houston Chronicle* and for many years an acerbic mainstay in the annual Gridiron spoofs of the powers that be.

About a year ago Cragg decided, like many other veteran journalists these days, to take early retirement. He worked up a great response, classic Cragg, in response to the many people who asked why he was quitting, and what he planned to do.

“Because I can,” Cragg said, and “whatever I want.”

Would that the same was true for newspapers or the news media more broadly! Instead what we see are institutions shrinking before our eyes, increasingly constrained by dwindling audience and resources and profoundly humbled in the scope of their ambitions.

For those of us who have spent our careers in journalism this is a mighty blow, a brutal shock – and never mind that in those same careers we have chronicled the demise or transformation of one august institution after another, from airlines and dot.com high-flyers to Enron and Fannie Mae.

The difference is that the diminution of our craft, more than most, is linked to an impoverishment of democracy itself. Fewer voices mean less information, less debate, and therefore less considered judgments in the domestic and foreign policy choices that affect us all. We’ve seen the consequences – in the largely unquestioning acceptance of WMD claims in the run-up to war with Iraq, in the uncritical initial support for using Ethiopia as a proxy army to invade Somalia and now, I would argue, in the quick rush to media judgment on the war between Georgia and Russia.

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That’s one of the reasons we established the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. As a long-time DC bureau chief I had witnessed the trends I’ve just described. But I had also spent most of my reporting time after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in Muslim countries of the Middle East and Africa, from Iraq and its neighbors to Sudan. In the months just before the Iraq war I traveled throughout the region, and found virtually no one who felt that the war would be anything other than disastrous – for themselves, for the Iraqi people and, ultimately, for the interests of the United States. But in that tour of the region I also encountered virtually no other American reporters. Hundreds of them were jostling for position at Fort Campbell or in Kuwait, aiming to get as close as possible to the “tip of the spear” for what all saw as the inevitable war to come. And because it was seen as inevitable, and because most media outlets had lost interest in reporting anything beyond topics of direct local relevance, there was little or no interest in dispatching journalists around the region or even within Iraq itself. The elite media outlets were allowed to set the tone of coverage. On key points it turned out they they got it wrong – and their repetition of facts that turned out to be false and cheerleading for the war turned out a gross disservice – to journalism, to the American public, and even to the Bush administration, which surely would have benefited from a more robust debate before the bombs started to fall.

We established the Pulitzer Center at the beginning of 2006, with the intent to fill the growing gaps in the supply of enterprise reporting around the world and also to be as innovative in the delivery of these reports as possible, to engage younger audiences that have largely turned away from traditional news media. We've commissioned some 75 reporting projects thus far, in nearly 50 countries, and we've worked with media partners to place these stories across the spectrum of print and broadcast outlets – from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* to NPR, BBC, public television and dozens of regional newspapers and national magazines. We have become the principal supplier of short video documentaries for the public television program *Foreign Exchange*, producing over 30 of these videos so far and matching them as often as possible with print publication to permit cross-marketing and maximum impact. All of our videos are on the Pulitzer Center channel at YouTube, which is also partnering with us this fall on a terrific contest to encourage the use of that platform for original enterprise reporting on topics of substance. All of this is detailed on our website, at www.pulitzercenter.org, and in our e-newsletter and RSS feeds of our stories and blog reports from the field. I hope you'll take a look, and subscribe.

We've also arranged for our journalists to speak on panels at some five dozen universities, often in tandem with local experts on the topic of their reporting projects. This is part of our Global Gateway initiative, which also includes journalist presentations at high schools – initially in a pilot project involving half a dozen St. Louis schools and now spreading to additional schools and cities -- and we hope to a national online presence via a new partnership we've established with Brown University's Watson Institute, producers of the Choices for the 21st Century curriculum material that reaches 5,000 high schools. The aim of the collaboration is to combine the immediacy of our journalism with the depth of Brown's expertise in curriculum development and its network of schools. I'm eager to discuss these initiatives in greater detail, if there are questions after, and would welcome your help in bringing our journalists to Houston schools and universities.

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One of our early projects was one I did myself, two years ago, in the south Caucasus. The goal was to assess the “frozen conflicts” left over from the breakup of the Soviet Union. I focused especially on Nagorno Karabakh, the disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but I also traveled to Georgia and to South Ossetia, which along with Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast had broken away from Georgian control in the civil wars of the early 1990s that coincided with the breakup of the Soviet Union. It happened that the week I spent in Tbilisi that country's bold young president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was in Washington, basking in a Rose Garden welcome and the enthusiastic embrace of Republicans and Democrats alike for his own Rose Revolution, the mass movement that brought him to power in the winter of 2003-04, and his ever-deepening ties to the U.S. in the years that followed. Saakashvili was under 40 and many of his senior aides were under 30; virtually all of them were, like Saakashvili, the product of American schools – in his case, George Washington and Columbia – and ardently pro-

American. He had the further advantage of lavish American aid – hundreds of millions of dollars in economic and military assistance and a bipartisan thrust to put Georgia on the fast track to membership in both the European Union and NATO. President Bush himself had celebrated this new alliance in Russia's backyard the year before, on a triumphant visit that included a speech to tens of thousands in downtown Tbilisi and the renaming of the airport road as George W. Bush Boulevard.

Yet for all that I came away from Georgia in 2006 more troubled than impressed. The papers were full of bellicose statements from Saakashvili and other Georgian officials, vowing to take back the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and touting what was, thanks to the U.S., among the fastest increases in military spending in the world. Journalists at the one independent television station reported intimidation from government officials and there was concern even at the pro-government main station. While I was in Tbilisi high government officials were linked to the murder of a prominent local man and subsequent cover-up; a popular anchor resigned her position on camera in protest against government insistence that only its side of the story be told. I visited Javokharti, the predominantly ethnic Armenian section of southern Georgia, and was told there of rank discrimination by Saakashvili's government on access to education, jobs and other basic national rights. I investigated the government's brutal suppression of a prison riot that had taken place the previous spring and its failure to take action against any of the senior officials involved. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International had both censured Saakashvili's government for these and similar offenses, as had the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The situation was even worse in South Ossetia, where Saakashvili had staged an abortive military mission in 2004 and where tensions remained high. The roughly 60,000 ethnic Ossetians who occupied the capital city of Tshkinvali and nearby villages were uniformly pro-Russian; many had close ties to relatives just across the Caucasus mountains in North Ossetia. In the interviewing I did there I met no Ossetians who favored reintegration with Georgia; from many I heard stories of intimidation or violence at the hands of Georgian troops in command of ethnic Georgian territory in the checkerboard of mountain villages that comprise the territory of South Ossetia. If there was ever a country and leader that called for restraining outside influence, I felt, it was Georgia and Misha Saakashvili – yet for the most part what he received instead was adulation, half-hearted admonitions and the repeated assurance that if was not already a member in good standing of the western alliance he would be soon.

This summer we commissioned a new project on Russia that included a second look at what was happening in Georgia. This was part of a larger series, funded by the Stanley Foundation, looking at rising powers around the world. Pulitzer's charge was to look at three of those countries – Russia, Turkey and India – and explore in what ways their emergence on the global stage might be affected by persistent conflicts within. Our reports on India, by Jason Motlagh, have already appeared, in newspapers and magazines and on public television. They're available on our website, at pulitzercenter.org, and I hope you'll take a look. Reporting on Turkey commences this fall. On Russia and the Caucasus our team of journalists consisted of videographers Jason Maloney and Kira

Kay, of the non-profit Bureau for International Reporting, and Polish print journalist Zygmunt Dziescolowski. We knew that tensions were building in Georgia and what happened there would eventually spill over to Russia itself, and beyond. The journalists focused their work in Abkhazia, the second breakaway region, a Black Sea coastal area that had long been a favorite summer resort for Russians, and in Kodori Gorge, the mountainous region on Abkhazia's border controlled by Georgian troops. They were in the region just days before just a few days before war erupted in South Ossetia, and with it the quick dispatch of Russian forces to Abkhazia, the Kodori Gorge and surrounding territories. One of the reports from the Pulitzer-funded team aired last Thursday on *NewsHour*. It included interviews with a range of Abkhazia residents and also the president, Sergei Bagapsh – a man elected to that office in 2004, by the way, in *opposition* to the Moscow-backed candidate. Bagapsh and the others stressed that Abkhazians were deeply committed to independence – and adamantly opposed to any reintegration with Georgia.

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The world awoke to news of war in the Caucasus, on the morning of Friday Aug. 8, the opening day of the Beijing Olympics. There was some initial confusion and missteps – you'll recall those scenes of President Bush laughing in the Olympic stands with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and the conflicting early accounts from Moscow and Tbilisi as to who had fired first – yet by the end of that first weekend there was a remarkable consistency in both the official U.S. position and the way that this crisis was presented in the American media. Russia was the aggressor, Georgia the innocent victim, the stakes were nothing less than the fate of democracy from eastern Europe to central Asia, and the historical analogies of choice were Munich 1938, the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 and the Soviet tanks rumbling into Prague in 1968.

The Russian media, its independence long since defanged by Putin, unleashed a torrent of jingoism and exaggeration, with grossly inflated numbers of South Ossetian casualties and very loose talk of genocide by Georgian troops, plus a heaping dose of xenophobia and vitriol against ethnic Georgians and other minorities living within Russia itself. All this was unfortunate, but predictable. Less predictable, and more lamentable, was that so much of the same critique could be applied to media coverage in the United States, with news columns and opinion pieces alike letting loose a barrage of anti-Russia invective, unreflective acceptance of suspect Georgian claims, and an eagerness to mount once again the Cold War barricades that would be astonishing even if we had not experienced the past seven years of military overreach and the downsides of the unilateralist resort to force.

If you read the coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* – and I cite those papers only because they are by and large the best we have – you would find at various moments that Russian tanks were headed for Tbilisi, that “every window was shattered” in the Georgian city of Gori, that “vast swaths” of Georgia had been overrun

by Russian troops who now “occupied” the country. Future historians will surely scratch their heads, wondering on what such reporting was based. To me that repeated phrase “vast swaths” was the tip-off that something was amiss. You can talk about “vast swaths” of territory in a place like Texas, in fact your state does have vast swaths of territory. It goes down a little harder when you’re talking about S. Ossetia, a region equal in size to Rhode Island, or Georgia as a whole, a place about as big as South Carolina. It now appears that war casualties were in fact surprisingly small, in the low hundreds of deaths; that with the exception of a single apartment building damage to Gori was relatively slight; that Russian troops had never ventured more than a few kilometers into undisputed Georgian space; and that with few exceptions the positions it established were in line with the security zones to which it was explicitly authorized in the cease-fire agreement signed by Russian President Dmitir Medvedev and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

And then there was the media presentation of Misha Saakashvili himself – the dashing young president, the graduate of George Washington and Columbia, the fluent English speaker eloquently standing for the Rose Revolution that brought him to power in 2003 and that made possible the flourishing of democracy in this ancient kingdom in the mountains on Russia’s southern flank. In the days after the war he was a ubiquitous presence on American television and in American newspapers, framing his stance as a beacon of liberty on the front lines of Russia’s neo-imperialist drive to subjugate its once and maybe future satellite states. By his telling Georgia had no alternative to war: The order to send his troops into South Ossetia came only after weeks of escalating provocations by Russia and its South Ossetian provocateurs and then, finally, the dispatch of hundreds of Russian tanks through the Roki Tunnel that connects South Ossetia to Russia proper.

Now, two weeks later, there is general consensus among western diplomats and independent observers such as the International Crisis Group that in fact Georgia made the decisive move first, shelling the South Ossetian capital city of Tshkinvali *before* the Russian tanks crossed into South Ossetian territory – and that Saakashvili took that action against the express warnings of U.S. and western European allies. He did so knowing that the Russian peacekeepers long stationed in Tshkinvali would likely be killed and that civilians caught in the shelling would likely be among the many South Ossetians who had in recent years taken up Russia’s offer of citizenship. He did so knowing – or hoping – that by throwing himself and his countrymen before the Russian tanks he could force the U.S. and NATO to intervene on Georgia’s behalf.

Let me posit that Russia has been spoiling for this fight in Georgia for years -- that Vladimir Putin despised Saakashvili and was determined to seize whatever opportunity to put that tiny country again under Moscow’s boot. That is no excuse for Saakashvili handing Putin the opening he sought, however, or for the United States over the course of several reckless years to have egged him on. Nor is it any excuse, once war came, for U.S. officials to make a series of statements that ranged from disingenuous to grossly hypocritical. President Bush said that invading a sovereign country is, quote, “unacceptable in the 21st Century” – and never mind Iraq or Afghanistan. Secretary of

State Condoleezza Rice said that in Georgia Russia was “using the one tool that it has always used ... and that’s its military power.” As if the United States in its own sphere of influence, Latin America and the Caribbean, had not done the same again and again. United Nations Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad protested that “the days of overthrowing leaders by military means in Europe -- those days are gone.” The implicit wink in that statement was caught by Jon Stewart: Those days are gone *in Europe*, Stewart pointed out, but not in Iraq or Afghanistan or maybe even Iran.

Yet as any Russian would note the statement was misleading even in the context of military action to overthrow a leader *in Europe*. Think of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, or the war President Bill Clinton waged against Serbia on behalf of Kosovo – and in defiance of the United Nations Security Council. The U.S. and European decision earlier this year to recognize Kosovo’s independence, over the opposition of Russia and Serbia, was a prime contributor, in fact, to the Georgia-Russia war. Putin himself was emphatic in declaring, for months before and after Kosovo’s independence, that there was no distinguishable difference between the statelet of Kosovo, ethnically cleansed through violent means, and the disputed Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Russian leader wasn’t subtle: “The Kosovo precedent is a terrible precedent,” Putin said after Kosovo’s independence was declared. “It is in essence breaking open the entire system of international relations that has prevailed not just for decades but for centuries. And it without a doubt will bring on itself an entire chain of unforeseen circumstances.” Our diplomats have insisted repeatedly that there is no analogy between the two situations but in their insistence I have never heard any argument that advanced beyond simple assertion – the situations are different because we say they are different. Full stop.

There were two other big-picture decisions on the part of the West, and especially the United States, that made Georgia combustible. The first was the determination, going back to the early Clinton administration, to extend NATO ever eastward – insisting all the while that there was nothing threatening to Russia in the expansion of the great alliance created to contain Soviet Russia and yet at the same time withholding membership in the organization to Russia itself. The Bush administration went even further, pressing at the NATO summit last April to put Georgia on a fast-track to membership and, failing that, winning approval to get the issue reconsidered at the next summit meeting, this December. Putin responded by ordering military exercises on North Ossetia’s border with South Ossetia, a move that in retrospect clearly positioned his forces for war. George Kennan, the author of Soviet containment, warned a decade ago that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold war era. Such a development may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion,” Kennan wrote; “to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.” In an op-ed eulogizing Kennan in 2005 former UN Ambassador Richard Holbrooke recounted a 1996 dinner party at which Kennan had voiced his NATO concerns. “Events of course proved Clinton right and Kennan ... wrong,” Holbrooke wrote. Or maybe, it appears now, not.

The third contributing factor was the decision to erect missile defense installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. We insisted that these installations were purely defensive in nature, aimed at Iran or rogue states and not at Russia, but we never bothered to take the steps required to persuade the Russians that we were in fact sincere – by taking up Putin’s suggestion of a joint installation in Azerbaijan, for example, or by delaying deployment of the installations until a better understanding was reached. The fact that we pressured the Poles into approving the anti-missile deployment on its territory just days after the Russian invasion of Georgia, and that Rice herself hurried to Warsaw to tout this as an important signal of U.S.-Polish resolve, was proof to most Russians that in fact we had never meant what we said.

I’d like to be able to say that all of this is another aberration of the Bush administration – in the great cautionary words of John Quincy Adams, recklessly going “abroad in search of monsters to destroy” and involving “herself beyond the power of extraction in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standards of freedom.” But alas, I cannot make such a claim. On the Democratic side Barack Obama responded to the war by reiterating his call for Georgia’s admission to NATO. His running mate Joe Biden traveled to Tbilisi to meet with Misha Saakashvili and came home calling for an immediate commitment of \$1 billion to shore up the Georgian government. Does he understand that we’ve invested nearly that much already – and that much of the investment was blown up this month in the Russian attack? On the Republican side John McCain, a longtime Saakashvili confidante, declared at once that “We are all Georgians now.” He called for Russia’s expulsion from the G-8 group of industrialized democracies and for Georgia’s immediate admission to NATO. Meaning that under Article 5 of that organization’s charter, the next time Saakashvili chooses to flout the warnings of his western friends and to bait the Russian bear ... the U.S. will by treaty obligation be at war with Russia itself.

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And so the chickens come home to roost. Russian President Medvedev today formally recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, following up on the unanimous vote Monday calling for that action by Russia’s parliament. There was jubilation in the streets of Sukhumi and Tshkinvali – a sobering reminder to Russia’s critics, I hope, that this isn’t exactly a replay of Prague 1968 or Warsaw 1939. The fact is that most of the ethnic Georgians who lived in these breakaway regions are long since gone, dating back to the wars of the early 1990s that were precipitated by Georgia itself -- and that Georgia in the years since had done precious little to redress. Independent observers acknowledge the obvious, that any fair vote in either region would overwhelmingly choose independence or union with Russia over reintegration with Georgia. That train, thanks in large part to Saakashvili and his equally impulsive predecessors, has long since left the train.

Medvedev, true to Russian form, cited the Kosovo precedent in his remarks today, noting that his country had stuck to its call for a negotiated settlement of the Georgian territorial issues “even after the unilateral proclamation of Kosovo’s independence” -- and that it was Georgia, not Russia, that for years had refused to conclude agreements on the non-use of force to resolve the conflicts. Saakashvili, even truer to Georgian form, responded to the moves toward independence by restating his defiant insistence that he would yet achieve the reintegration of his country – presumably through force, although when and how was far from clear.

Vice President Dick Cheney is on his way to Tbilisi, and to Azerbaijan and Ukraine, underscoring U.S. resolve in backing Saakashvili and shoring up the nearby countries that had also opted for ties to the west and now wonder if they had chosen wrong. In the backdrop, as ever, the politics of oil and gas – in this case the BP pipeline from Baku through Tbilisi to Ceyhan in Turkey, a Clinton-era project hailed as key to weaning Europe from dependence on Russian-controlled oil. The 1 million barrels of oil that flow through the pipeline now look as though they may be conditioned on Russian approval, after all, and meanwhile Europe remains overwhelmingly dependent on oil and gas from Russia itself. So when the western European leaders decry Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as many of them did today, one wonders what leverage or will they will employ to back their protests up.

Zygmunt Dziocolowski, one of the journalists we’ve funded on the Georgia/Russia project, wrote on our *Untold Stories* blog today that Abkhazia’s celebration of independence was bittersweet. The people there have yearned for independence for years, he said, but they had wanted an independence recognized by all – by Europeans and the United States and Georgia itself. What they have instead is the unilateral endorsement by Russia, a probable echo from the likes of Cuba, Syria, and Belarus, and unrelenting hostility from everyone else – in the context of an international environment that finds Russia itself more isolated than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

And to end on an even gloomier note, there’s every possibility that a situation that is bad already could get even worse – now that we have staked out our respective positions, the U.S. on the side of a headstrong Georgian leader and the Russians just as adamant that there will be no return to the *status quo ante*. It’s obvious I’m sure from the foregoing that I don’t buy the loosely offered analogies to past Russian outrages, whether Poland or Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan. I do see parallels to another August, in 1914, when small-minded politicians spurred on by jingoistic journalism allowed an obscure conflict in a remote corner of Europe to erupt into a brutal world war. My hope is that this time cooler heads will prevail, that the media will play its role more responsibly, and that solutions will be found that put the interests of civilians – not politicians – first.

Thanks very much for the opportunity to be here. At the Pulitzer Center we’re very much in favor of multiple perspectives and open debate. I welcome your questions, and hearing where I’ve gone astray.

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