

## **Framing the Caucasian War – A Content Analysis of the Media Coverage in Europe and Russia**

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The Caucasian War dominated the political media coverage during the summer of 2008. When Georgia attacked its separatist region South Ossetia, Russia justified its military action with the need to protect its ethnic minorities. In Europe, the conflict was initially seen as the return of the Cold War, and therefore aroused deep fears in the Western community and led to a high level of attention in the media. For the political elites, the war was a touchstone in international conflict management. In media coverage, different patterns of interpretation, especially regarding the assignment of responsibility, competed against each other. This paper focuses on the analysis of the framing of the conflict in European and Russian media.

In modern societies, political decisions have to be legitimated through public debate, which is mainly taking place in the mass media. Since mass media is highly dependent on official sources and focus on established actors, media tends to follow the strategic interests of its respective national political actors. Therefore, governments have a privileged position in enforcing their preferred frames. The interpretation of the war in European and Russian media is expected to differ as it reflects mainly the governments' positions. This is especially true for Russia, since its mass media is strongly influenced by the political system. In Europe, the media and political systems cannot be regarded as homogeneous, but, due to the external threat, national differences in mass media coverage are expected to be comparably weak.

As opposed to mass media, micro media (e.g. weblogs) do not reflect official positions but rather communicate the perspective of civil society. Its authors usually act as independent speakers, use more versatile sources and often criticize the positions of the mass media. They can therefore be seen as a corrective in public discourse. Due to the transnational interconnectedness of micro media, European and Russian weblogs are more likely to refer to each other than European and Russian mass media. The structural differences between mass and micro media lead to the assumption that micro media will show a) a different framing of the conflict and b) more references to the coverage of other national and international media.

To test the assumptions, a quantitative content analysis of the framing strategies in mass media (print news magazines) and micro media (weblogs) in Europe and Russia was

conducted. Thus, the paper deals with two comparisons: it investigates international differences and differences between the types of media. Due to the potential reach of the media content under study we chose countries that are home to the three most spoken languages in Europe: Great Britain, Germany/Austria and France. For each language two news magazines and two political weblogs were analyzed over a period of eight weeks (July 15th to September 15th 2008). The findings on European coverage are compared to the coverage in the respective Russian mass and micro media. First results are due in January 2009.