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## Plucky little Georgia: Saakashvili's PR agency wins on second front

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**Ian Traynor**The Guardian, Saturday 16 August 2008

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With his New York legalese, motormouth soundbites and ubiquity on the American networks, Mikheil Saakashvili is never lost for words. The beleaguered Georgian president is so omnipresent on Larry King, on BBC World, in tele-conferences for reporters, editors, and columnists worldwide, that it is hard to see where he finds the time to fight a war or run a country.

But the week-old Russia-Georgia conflict highlights the mores and methods of modern warfare. Propaganda and black radio have always been essential tools of the warmonger. What's new in the Caucasus is the battle between the PR agencies taking the warmongers' shilling and competing for airtime and column inches on behalf of their clients.

Saakashvili might have lost the war against Russia, but, scant consolation perhaps, he is widely seen to have won the propaganda battle. Big bad Russia against plucky little Georgia. Accurate or nonsense, thanks to "Misha's" Brussels-based PR men, it is the picture that's dominating the world media.

Last year Saakashvili paid a reported €500,000 to engage Brussels' Aspect Consulting to brand Georgia as a western wannabe, a Nato and European Union aspirant, emphasising everything from its fabulous food and drink to its liberties and democratic politics.

The PR campaign went into overdrive last week when Georgia found itself on the receiving end of post-Soviet Russia's first ever invasion of another country. Reporters covering the conflict have been showered daily with emails providing news, contact details, mobile phone numbers of officials, video footage, background material, and tele-conference access to Georgians from Saakashvili down. Highly efficient, highly effective, usually punctual.

The Kremlin's account is held by another Brussels agency, GPlus, which has been working for the Russian presidency for more than two years. It insists it is not in the business of peddling propaganda, far less falsehoods, but merely facilitates international media access to Russian policy-makers and advises the Russians on their media strategies. "We give them logistical support," said Tim Price of GPlus.

Even the Russians are complaining that their side is losing in the publicity stakes. "You can't fail to notice that Russian leaders are ignoring the opportunity to convey their point of view to the world," wrote the Moscow pundit, Aleksei Arbatov. "Saakashvili is really never off American TV screens. I suspect that if [Russian president] Medvedev decided to talk to foreign journalists, they would, of course, respond."

The success of the Georgia PR campaign has made it to the cover this week of the trade magazine PR Week, where Aspect is taking the war to the opposition. "I'm on the side of the angels," Aspect's founding partner, James Hunt, told the magazine. He held his nose at the thought of GPlus.

"There are agencies that work for Russia. But I don't know how they can be comfortable about that."

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