

Medvedev: PR magician!!

Medvedev takes on the West in media blitz

AFP

MOSCOW, Aug 27 2008-President Dmitry Medvedev is storming onto the world stage with a major Western media blitz, taking Russia's case on Georgia directly to the people and hoping to win some hearts and minds in the process.

Within hours of announcing Russian recognition of independence for two Georgian separatist regions, Medvedev gave interviews to CNN, the BBC, al Jazeera and France's LCI television, getting his message across with savvy PR.

He also penned a commentary in the Financial Times entitled "Why I had to recognise Georgia's breakaway regions" before flying off to Central Asia, where he was due to meet Chinese President Hu Jintao.

Three months after taking office, the 42-year-old leader is stepping out of the long shadow cast by his predecessor and mentor Vladimir Putin to lead the Russian charge in what top military officers term the global "information war."

"We don't need another Cold War or a modern-day remake", Medvedev said in the CNN interview.

That said, Russia was "ready for anything," he told Russia Today, the state-run, English-language Russian satellite television news channel conceived to help beam Moscow's perspective into hotel rooms and homes around the world.

The rare series of high-profile interviews underscored the shift in strategy for the Kremlin where previous reclusive leaders repeatedly assailed Western media for the "negative" coverage of Russia but never hit back on their turf.

"They realised that they needed to explain the rationale behind this decision," said Tim Price, partner at Brussels-based GPlus Europe, a sister company of giant US public relations firm Ketchum that is advising the Kremlin.

"They understand that they need to tell their story and that people want to listen," Price told AFP.

GPlus Europe has been advising the Kremlin since April 2006 on its media strategy, monitoring western coverage of Russia and hammering on the message that it needs to open up to journalists.

At the start of the conflict in Georgia, it was the English-speaking, US-backed President Mikheil Saakashvili who dominated Western coverage as Russian officials openly acknowledged they were losing the PR battle.

While support for Russia's military actions in Georgia was solid at home, there has been broad international condemnation for what the United States has termed Russia's "aggression" against its former Soviet neighbour.

"Medvedev was responding to the fact that Saakashvili was making almost daily appearances on CNN and the BBC," said Oleg Panfilov, head of the Center for journalism in extreme situations, a Russian media watchdog.

"But I don't think he will be successful.

"He can try to correct Russia's image in the West but he will not be able to 'legitimise' the actions in Georgia" in the eyes of entrenched western opinion, he said.

In an arrangement reminiscent of reporters being "embedded" with US troops in Iraq, the Kremlin has also helped journalists report on the situation in South Ossetia, organising media tours of the areas damaged in the Georgian offensive on August 7.

Russian media handlers acted with unusual speed to organise the interviews with Medvedev, inviting television crews from the BBC, CNN and other media outlets on Monday to travel to the president's residence at the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

In parallel with the Medvedev interviews, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, a former UN ambassador who speaks fluent English, held a conference call -- in English -- with foreign journalists to explain Moscow's position.

Lavrov has been the Kremlin's media spokesperson during the conflict, in tandem with the deputy chief of the general staff, General Anatoly Nogovistyn, who has hosted daily media briefings carried live on television.

"We are like schoolchildren when it comes to using the media," commented Lavrov earlier this month. "But we are learning."