

'War of the Worlds' Broadcast Highlights Pathologies of Georgian-Russian Relations

By [Paul Goble](#)

March 16, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

[About this column](#)

[Window on Eurasia](#) covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA — A broadcast on Georgian television about "the possible course of development of events in the case of a [new] Russian intervention" has sparked discussion about the dangers of such a "War of the Worlds"-type TV show in the current environment and raised questions about "who benefits" from such actions.

But neither of these discussions, however instructive each may be about the specifics of this action, fully captures the way this broadcast and the media firestorm it has provoked highlight the fundamental pathology of Georgian-Russian relations, a pathology that unless it is addressed carefully threatens to make the situation in both countries and the region even worse.

The program, a full text of which is available at www.polit.ru/news/2010/03/14/9.html, has sparked a war of words, with the number of those who supposedly have benefited from the broadcast and the reasons each possible author or reactor has for gains now easily exceeding the number of the potentially guilty in Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Orient Express."

And just as in the great English mystery writer's case, all the various and competing charges are sufficiently plausible, given the record and interests of the participants and given that many both directly involved and observing from far away tend to forget the larger and very negative implications of both the program and reactions to it for Georgia, Russia, and the West.

For Georgia, the costs of such actions are perhaps the greatest. Mikheil Saakashvili has repeatedly shown himself prepared to engage in the kind of brinksmanship with Moscow that is intended to generate support for his regime at home and abroad, a tactic that has worked effectively precisely because Moscow has taken so many actions that appear to justify his actions.

But the current broadcast undermines Saakashvili's credibility both with other Georgians and with his supporters abroad, thus raising questions about whether, like the little boy in the story, he has cried wolf once too often, or whether others are manipulating the situation in order to put him and Georgia in that position.

At the very least, this latest incident will reduce the credibility of both Saakashvili and the Georgian media in the eyes of the Georgians and in the eyes of his supporters in Western countries, something that will make it harder for Georgia to escape from its current difficulties even if it helps to keep a diminished Saakashvili in office.

For Russia, it might appear, Saturday's broadcast might appear to be a win-win situation. The content of what many in both Moscow and Georgia are already calling Tbilisi's "War of the Worlds" broadcast simultaneously reduces the credibility of Georgian criticism of Russia's actual behavior and leaves Saakashvili in a weakened position at home and abroad.

Russia has frequently sought to weaken those around it by backing through false flag operations that push its opponents to make radically anti-Russian statements — the Cheka's "Trust" operation of the 1920s is a model — knowing full well that once those statements are shown to be false, those who make them will be the first to suffer.

That Russian reality adds a level of complexity to situations like the one found in Georgia today because it means the actual moving force behind such statements and actions may be very different than the ostensible one — even if those taking action or making statements are not aware because of "false flag" — type operations.

But as Russian officials have sometimes noted, those making the statements are not the last victims. On the one hand, while some in Moscow want only weak states around them, many recognize that such states are a source of instability within Russia. And on the other, the clumsiness and obviousness of such actions undermine Moscow's reputation as well.

And for the West, which has invested great hopes in Georgia's ability to overcome

the authoritarianism and corruption of its recent past, this broadcast simultaneously highlights the difficulties that most Western governments and observers have in figuring out what is going on in Georgia and the challenges of responding adequately to them.

Throughout most of the Western comments about the latest broadcast are suggestions that either Georgians are impossible to understand or crazy or worse, the kind of dismissive action that reflects how few real experts on that country there are in the West and especially in Western governments.

And in the restrained reactions of Western governments, at least so far, is the implicit and sometimes not-so-implicit suggestion that there is nothing that can be done or should be done to rein in the authoritarian impulses and brinksmanship that have characterized the Saakashvili years and that the West would do better to focus on other places and other issues.

Such lack of understanding and such policy approaches not only reduce the chances that the ideals of democracy that animated the Rose Revolution can be recovered and advanced but — and this is something many do not appear to understand — such willful ignorance and consequent neglect simultaneously undermines the credibility of the West and leaves it weaker too.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/03/16/war-of-the-worlds-broadcast-highlights-pathologies-of-georgian-russian-relations-a35113>