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## HAS GEORGIA WON THE INFORMATION WAR AGAINST RUSSIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN CONFLICT OF 2008?

### ***Abstract:***

*There has been established and promoted the strong belief in the Georgian public, however also in the international community, that despite significant human, territorial and state loss, as well as psychological damage and failure Georgia experienced as a consequence of the 2008 conflict with Russia, the smaller country gained victory over the bigger one in terms of the information war. There is attempt in the paper to find out if the above-mentioned view has been argumented sufficiently, taking into consideration two major factors: 1. The EU-backed “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia,” known informally as the “Tagliavini Report”, blaming Georgian former government of Mikheil Saakashvili „to fire the first shot” in the subsequent confrontation; 2. The smaller nation-state syndrome as of the victim in the conflictual interaction with the bigger one, playing important role not only in the Russian-Georgian, but also Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations.*

### ***Keywords:***

*Georgia; Russia; information war; Russian-Georgian Conflict of 2008;*

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## **Strong Belief in the Georgian Public and International Community regarding the Information War Winning Opportunity by Georgia**

Despite significant human, territorial and state loss, as well as psychological damage and failure Georgia experienced as a consequence of the 2008 conflict with Russia, the smaller country gained victory over the bigger one in terms of the information war – this stands in fact as a widespread idea, assessment, promoted afterwards not only within the Georgian public, but also shared not less significantly by at least part of the international community.

### **Aim of the Paper**

Through this paper we aim to learn whether the above-mentioned view concerning Georgia winning the information war against Russia majorly as a consequence of the 2008 conflict between these two countries has been proved amply, addressing two main factors:

1. The EU-backed “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia”<sup>2</sup>, known informally as the “Tagliavini Report” blaming Georgian former government of Mikheil Saakashvili „to fire the first shot” in the subsequent confrontation.
2. The smaller nation-state syndrome as of the victim in the conflictual interaction with the bigger one, playing important role not only in the Russian-Georgian, but also Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations.

### **The “Tagliavini Report”**

The Council of the European Union’s decision of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008 enabled the establishment of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG).

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<sup>2</sup> *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report*, Volume I, September 2009, <<https://app.box.com/s/ua268fpfxf>> (29.06.2018); Volume II, September 2009, <[http://www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/IIFFMCG\\_Volume\\_II1.pdf](http://www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/IIFFMCG_Volume_II1.pdf)>(29.06.2018); Volume III, September 2009, <<http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/05-Security/Tagliavini-2009Eng3.pdf>> (29.06.2018).

The aim of the fact-finding mission has been to investigate the origins and the course of the conflict, including with regard to international law, humanitarian law and human rights<sup>3</sup>.

Ms. Heidi Tagliavini, a Swiss diplomat and former head of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia, was appointed head of the mission. The mission, based in Geneva, started its work on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008.

The mission's mandate originally covered the period 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008 – 31<sup>st</sup> July 2009. It was subsequently extended by two months.

The role of the European Union is described in the Press release of the EU Council about the Presentation of the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, issued in Brussels on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2009.

According to the above-mentioned document, “After playing a key role in the ceasefire agreements of 12<sup>th</sup> August and 8<sup>th</sup> September 2008, the European Union has spearheaded the efforts of the international community aimed at the stabilisation and normalisation of the post-conflict situation in Georgia. On 15<sup>th</sup> September 2008, the Council launched the European Monitoring Mission in Georgia and appointed an EUSR for the crisis in Georgia.

The EU is committed to Georgia's security and stability, based on full respect for the principles of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflicts in Georgia. This commitment is tangible in several ways, notably:

- the continued presence on the ground of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM Georgia) in order to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire agreements of 12<sup>th</sup> August and 8<sup>th</sup> September 2008, to contribute to the stabilisation and the normalisation of the situation in the areas affected by the war, and to observe compliance with human rights and the rule of law;
- the leading role played by the EU, together with the UN and the OSCE, as co-Chair of the Geneva talks, where vital security and humanitarian issues arising from the conflict are substantially addressed;
- the increased financial assistance pledged by the EU in the framework of the International Donors' Conference on 22<sup>n</sup> October 2008 aimed at

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<sup>3</sup> COUNCIL DECISION 2008/901/CFSP of 2 December 2008 concerning an independent international fact-finding mission on the conflict in Georgia, “Official Journal of the European Union”, 2008, pp. 323-366.

post-conflict rehabilitation, support of internally displaced persons (IDP) and economic stability.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the key passages in the “Tagliavini Report” reads: “The shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia, yet it was only the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents.”<sup>5</sup>

During her presentation of the 1.200-page report to the international diplomats, Tagliavini said that while “the onus of having actually triggered off the war lies with the Georgian side, the Russian side, too, carries the blame for a substantial number of violations of international law.”<sup>6</sup>

The Swiss diplomat said chief among those are the “mass conferral of Russian citizenship”<sup>7</sup> in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the presence of non-peacekeeping Russian troops in South Ossetia before the war, the disproportionate Russian military action on Georgian territory, Russia’s long-standing support for the separatist authorities in the two regions, and its post-war recognition of the two territories as independent states.

The report states Russian allegations claiming Georgia had carried out ethnic cleansing or genocide against South Ossetians are not substantiated. But it also says “there are serious question marks”<sup>8</sup> when it comes to the inaction of the Russian army in allowing South Ossetian irregulars to commit atrocities - ethnic cleaning against the civilian, ethnically Georgian population.

### **The Smaller Nation-State Syndrome as of the Victim in the Conflictual Interaction with the Bigger One**

Taking into account related logical reasoning when we are talking about interaction and/or interrelations between bigger and smaller entities, and thus psychological effect it always has, including in politics and international politics, such a syndrome, as we may call it – “The Smaller Nation-State Syndrome

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<sup>4</sup> *Presentation of the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Press release of the Council of the European Union, 13875/09 (Presse 278), Brussels, 30.09.2009, <[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_PRES-09-278\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-09-278_en.htm)> (30.06.2018).

<sup>5</sup> A. Lobjakas, *EU Report On 2008 War Tilts Against Georgia*, 30.09.2009, <[https://www.rferl.org/a/EU\\_Report\\_On\\_2008\\_War\\_Tilts\\_Against\\_Georgia/1840447.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/EU_Report_On_2008_War_Tilts_Against_Georgia/1840447.html)> (29.06.2018).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

as of the Victim in the Conflictual Interaction with the Bigger One”, as well as a respective dichotomy, based on our observation, plays important role not only in the narrative of Russian (“aggressor”) - Georgian (“victim”), but also in the one/s of Georgian (“aggressor”) - Abkhazian (“victim”) and/or Georgian (“aggressor”) - Ossetian (“victim”) relations.

Noteworthy to mention, that it is not necessary that the above-mentioned positioning is true or at least always true. However, this stands as usually quite easy to play especially such card of a “victim”.

Therefore, starting from those involved, first of all local or national politicians, different professionals, experts, civil societies, to international bodies or the international community at large, they have to realize the almost “universality” of the problem of positioning or mispositioning and interpretation or misinterpretation, and address such challenges in joint efforts not forgetting also about the solid arguments in favor of the Theory of Relativity.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that it seems practically impossible to argue which of the two countries has won the information war against the other in the context of the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 based on the quite controversially interpreted “Tagliavini Report” due to majorly its legitimate allegations to the both sides, rather than finding lesser such evidences in their actions towards each other, another factor – The Smaller Nation-State Syndrome as of the Victim proves to work more efficiently in this regard, thus demonstrating a complex and significantly debatable picture of the following interactions as suggested above:

- Russian (“Aggressor”) – Georgian (“Victim”) Narrative;
- Georgian (“Aggressor”) - Abkhazian (“Victim”) and/or Georgian (“Aggressor”) - Ossetian (“Victim”) Narrative/s.

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