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**RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AGAINST GEORGIAN
CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES
(GEORGIA, TSKHINVALI REGION)**

During the dissolution of the Soviet Union, conflicts erupted in Georgia in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia. While these conflicts resulted in a tragedy affecting the entire country, the populations in and adjoining these territories were hit especially hard.

Today, Russian propaganda suggests that Ossetians are claiming Georgian culture and heritage as their own in an attempt to pit Georgia against Ossetians when the true conflict is between Georgia and Russia. Georgian citizens must preserve our heritage by widely disseminating the authentic history of the hand-carved monuments our ancestors created. We cannot allow this truth to be lost as a result of today's complex information war.

Mankind is facing a new challenge because the information warfare used for many years is becoming increasingly relevant. Although this war is invisible, it happening every minute of the day and is very dangerous, in part because it is having a negative impact on local conflicts. Many scholars believe that the conflicts presented as ethnic conflicts are in reality the result of a conflict between great ideologies and they are fueled by disinformation that has created a rift in Georgian-Ossetian relations.

Information warfare is a tactic in hybrid warfare, defined by Frank Hoffmann as: “the combined use of various methods of combat,

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including conventional, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist and criminal acts, to achieve victory.”² In his view, future wars will combine traditional and irregular combat operations, deploying both weapons and weaponized misinformation. The lethality of traditional conflict will be combined with the fanaticism of irregular combat in a long-term strategy.

Georgians vividly remember the fateful recent past that has befallen us, whose roots can be traced back in history. Well-known historian Vakhushti Bagrationi wrote about the settlement of Ossetians in Georgia: “And the Ossetians come into Georgian as the number of people inside country was reduced from the enemies.”³ According to the Russian ambassador to Georgia – Tatischev (1604-1615) in the middle of the 17th Century they also settled in the headwaters of the Great Liakhvi. By the 1770s, 2,860 Ossetian households lived on the southern slopes of the Caucasus. Of these, 860 lived in Samachablo; 200 in Saeristao and the rest scattered through many other places. Until the 20th Century, only Georgians, Armenians, and Jews lived in Tskhinvali. Some Ossetians were baptized as ‘Christians’ as soon as they settled in Kartli and tried to assimilate Christian customs, This had a positive effect on their consciousness, general culture, character, and behavior. The newly settled Ossetians were assisted by local Georgians in such tasks as arranging the yard-house, cultivating the gardens and vineyards, and overcoming other challenges.

Georgian kings, ecclesiastical and public figures made every effort to spread literacy and knowledge among our fellow Ossetians. The education of the children of the Ossetians was greatly enhanced by the highly educated King-poet Archil, who brought together the leading Ossetians and preached the importance of education. The Ossetians agreed, Archil divided several Ossetians into Russia, and in 1700 introduced Russian printing presses and Georgian letter molds to Moscow, which the Ossetians liked very much, as Zakaria Chichinadze noted⁴.

Georgian kings greatly assisted the Ossetian churches and monasteries as having a real mission to spread true knowledge and education among the population. King George XI of Kartli (1671-1688

² F. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Arlington 2007, p. 5.

³ V. Bagrationi, *Description of Kingdom of Georgia*, Tbilisi 1941, p.71

⁴ Z. Chichinadze, *The Settlement of Ossetians in Kartli and the Worthiness and Merit of Georgians on Them*, Tbilisi 1916.

and 1703-1709) donated bells with a gift inscription to the monastery in the village of Dzivgisi, Zeicis Zion, as a sign of friendly relations with the Ossetians.

Conflict, as early as 1991, manifested itself in the form in which our lives were sacrificed in the face of a hard yesterday, today, and an uncertain tomorrow. Due to well-known political and military processes, the Tskhinvali region, which was cut off from Georgian boundaries, has become an isolated entity and continues to live under the full influence of the Russian Federation.

The OSCE Mission to Georgia started working in the Tskhinvali region in late 1992. As a result of the conflict, up to a thousand people were killed and up to a hundred people were missing. About 70-80,000 people were evicted from their homes. The region was virtually empty. As of today, the population of the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia is 15,000-20,000.

It is natural that the information war, which is going on strongly all over the world today, is being actively carried out to completely separate the region from Georgia. In the current situation, Russia plays the role of ‘mediator’ and ‘peacemaker’ in the conflict it inspired. On June 24th, 1992, under the Russian (Sochi) Treaty, a joint peacekeeping force (consisting of Russian, Georgian and Ossetian) was deployed in the region and a Joint Control Commission was established.

Occupying forces of the Russian Federation are currently deployed in the Tskhinvali region, in violation of the August 12th, 2008 ceasefire agreement brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, which obliges Russia to withdraw its military forces to pre-conflict positions. The illegal decision of the Russian Federation on the so-called Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Only Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru support the recognition of ‘independence’ at this stage. As a result of the efforts of the Georgian authorities, Tuvalu and Vanuatu withdrew their recognition decision.

Today’s Great Hybrid Conflict, in which Russia is actively involved, incorrectly presents the Tskhinvali region as the historical homeland of the Russian policy-making Ossetian population. This is a lie masquerading as truth spread around the world through falsified information. Sadly, Georgians are not doing enough to defend our cultural heritage against this disinformation. Unless Georgia speaks out vociferously, this disinformation will become ‘fact’ for those who read it.

Georgia is a poor country. We do not have abundant gas or oil. However, our ancestors left us a rich cultural legacy that we must

preserve and pass on to future generations. Our forefathers built churches and castles that weathered the centuries and form the foundation of our heritage. Their labor was manual. Our labor is digital. We must protect and correct the historical record.

From this point of view, it is interesting to observe what appears in local news. It is simply an ‘echo’ of the Kremlin's policy. Against this background, Russian-Ossetian local propaganda weapons are actively engaged. The media remain one of the most powerful tools for developing Kremlin policies and imposing them on the people whose lives they control.

The 1990s were a time before the internet had fully consumed traditional television, radio, and print media, especially in the Tskhinvali region. These media outlets were among the most popular in the Tskhinvali region, and spread the Russian point of view:

- “Yuzhnaya Ossetia” (Republican Public-Political Newspaper);
- “Website of the President of South Ossetia”;
- “Xurzærin” (Tsiskari); Osinform (News Agency);
- Iriston.com (on the history and culture of Ossetia);
- Resa (State News Agency) (Head of State News Agency) Maia Kharebova;
- Ossetian.com (ossetians.com);
- “Iron Avzadji Club” (Ирон æвзæджы клуб) Alans Language Club, and others.

The information war has proliferated significantly since then and the occupiers are now attempting to reinvent the true history of Georgian cultural monuments located inside the occupied territories for their interests. It is cultural cleansing accomplished by purposefully leaving out key facts in their retelling. The Georgian roots of Georgian architectural monuments are being purged in the Ossetian retelling of ancient history, creating a new, fake ‘reality’.

Contemporary bloggers are covering the Tskhinvali region and spreading this misinformation, including Maria Plion (Plieva), Zarina Sanakoeva, Temur Tskhovrebov, and others. The website ‘Ossetian Radio and Television’ (Information-Analytical Edition) is adding to the disinformation, as is “Yuzhnaya Ossetia” (Republican Socio-Political Newspaper). And although they are slightly critical of governmental communication to serve their own goals, their pushback is not nearly enough to combat the historical misperceptions that have been created.

For example, the 16th Century Georgian monument Achabeti Fortress has been renamed ‘Alans Fortress’, to claim the site as Ossetian.

Schoolchildren visit so-called restoration works, which are widely covered by the above-mentioned ‘media outlets’ and spread in the Russian-speaking world. This generation will grow up with a fundamental misunderstanding of their geographical and cultural history.

Another noteworthy example is the false information spread about the 12th Century Ikorti temple, recently portrayed as if members of the Ossetian royal family Bidzina Cholokashvili, Shalva, and Elizbar Ersitaves were resting here. These historical figures are Georgian, who sacrificed themselves to Georgia. It is known that two years later the leaders of the Kakheti uprising of 1659 were tortured to death in Iran. After a long time, their remains were secretly recovered and buried in the temple of Ikorta⁵.

Over time, if left unchallenged and uncorrected, new generations will never know Georgia’s true history. Consequently, Georgians need to work with progressive-minded Ossetians to restore the historical friendship of these two peoples and clarify historical misperceptions created by Russian misinformation. If Georgians do not take active steps to combat the misappropriation of their churches and other ancient monuments, they will be lost forever.

Georgian government and citizens must create and reintroduce powerful Internet resources to reclaim historical and legal reality. It is the basis for maintaining Georgian statehood. If centuries ago Georgia had suffered physical destruction with the sword, today it is experiencing the destruction of its cultural heritage through an information war. Our birthrights are being eliminated before our eyes. We are in great danger, and unless all nationalities of our small country stand together for truth, we risk losing the cultural legacies our ancestors left for us.

Ilia Chavchavadze’s 19th Century publication “Sounds of Stones” is especially relevant as the methods of falsification used by the conquerors centuries ago threaten Georgian culture monuments and geopolitical justice. The cornerstones of our historical buildings were removed in Javakheti and replaced with news stones falsely claiming the handiwork of our forefathers.

⁵ *The Ikorta church of the Archangel*, <<https://www.ikorta.com/news/the-ikorta-church-of-the-archangel>> (23.12.2020).