

Georgia: “Invasion” hoax used to whip up anti-Russian fears

Niall Green
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Viewers of the 8pm Saturday news broadcast by the Imedi network in the former Soviet republic of Georgia switched on their televisions to see an invading force of Russian tanks and soldiers heading towards the capital, Tbilisi, while bombs fell across the country. Over this footage an announcer declared that the Georgian government had fallen and the country’s president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was dead.

The half-hour report also claimed that the Kremlin had installed Nino Burdzhnashvili, leader of the opposition Democratic Movement-United Georgia party, as the new head of state.

By the end of the broadcast, Georgia’s mobile phone network had collapsed, overwhelmed as people desperately tried to contact emergency services, friends and loved ones.

It quickly transpired, however, that the broadcast had been a hoax. The station had recycled footage from the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, a conflict that had been ignited by the Saakashvili government’s bombardment of Russian troops stationed in the separatist province of South Ossetia.

There are reports of heart attacks and miscarriages brought on by viewing the broadcast, as well as the hospitalization for stress of several children, perhaps still suffering from the trauma of the 2008 war. There have been widespread expressions of outrage at Imedi TV in Georgia, with thousands of posts on Internet discussion boards and Facebook condemning the broadcast.

Georgy Arveladze, owner of Imedi TV, claimed afterwards that the intention of the program was to show the “real threat” from Russia. A statement from the broadcaster pointed out that there had been a brief message before the start of the news program letting

viewers know that what followed was a “simulation”.

Arveladze is a close backer of Saakashvili, and his station regularly issues pro-government propaganda. The president granted Arveladze control of the Georgia Media Production Group, which owns Imedi TV, in 2008 after the death of its former owner, Badri Patarkatsishvili.

One of Georgia’s richest men and an opponent of the president, Patarkatsishvili died while in exile in Britain, having been accused of conspiring to overthrow the Saakashvili government.

Georgian opposition leaders condemned the hoax as a state-sponsored smear against Burdzhnashvili, who was in Moscow at the time for talks with the Russian government.

“This government’s treatment of its own people is outrageous. I am sure that every second of this program was agreed with Saakashvili,” Burdzhnashvili told international media.

Saakashvili defended the broadcast, stating: “It was indeed a very unpleasant program but the most unpleasant thing is that it is extremely close to what can happen and to what Georgia’s enemy has conceived.”

The US ambassador in Georgia, John Bass, said the situation between Georgia and Russia was “serious enough without this sort of sensational quasi-news activity.” However, the regime in Tbilisi is a creation of US imperialism, which sponsored Saakashvili’s takeover of power in the 2003 “Rose Revolution.”

Washington saw in Saakashvili an agent through which it could move Georgia further away from Moscow’s traditional sphere of influence, transforming it into a pro-US bastion in the geostrategically vital Caucasus region, through which vast quantities of oil and natural gas are piped from the Caspian Basin to world markets.

Saakashvili's reckless attack on Russian forces in 2008, which led to the deaths of hundreds of military personnel and civilians on both sides and produced a military debacle for Georgia, almost brought Russia and the United States to war: the Bush administration considered sending troops to back its client. Washington has spent billions of dollars developing Georgia's military and, until recently, sought to bring it into the US-led NATO military alliance.

Like other so-called "color revolutions" sponsored by Washington—notably Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in 2004—the US-backed regime change in Tbilisi has produced a corrupt, unstable and anti-democratic regime. Saakashvili is widely hated in the country, and has violently put down opposition protests while regularly using state forces to suppress opposition parties. Faced with mounting opposition in Georgia and locked in a bitter feud with the Kremlin, the Saakashvili government is capable of resorting to further, and even more dangerous, provocations.



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