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**Ariadna SOROKIVSKA-OBIKHOD**

PhD Student scientific and organizational department of Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Army Academy, 32 Heroes of Maidan Street, Lviv, Ukraine, postal code 79026 (ariadnasor@ukr.net)

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-4413-9480

**ResearcherID:** 3000102

**Ivanna CHOBIT**

PhD Student scientific and organizational department of Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Army Academy, 32 Heroes of Maidan Street, Lviv, Ukraine, postal code 79026 (ivannachobit23@gmail.com)

**ORCID:** 0000-0001-6669-2474

**Ариадна СОРОКІВСЬКА-ОБИХОД**

ад'юнкт штатний науково-організаційного відділу Національної академії сухопутних військ імені гетьмана Петра Сагайдачного, вул. Героїв Майдану, 32, м. Львів, Україна, індекс 79026 (ariadnasor@ukr.net)

**Іванна ЧОБИТ**

ад'юнкт штатний науково-організаційного відділу Національної академії сухопутних військ імені гетьмана Петра Сагайдачного, вул. Героїв Майдану, 32, м. Львів, Україна, індекс 79026 (ivannachobit23@gmail.com)

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**INFORMATIONAL INFLUENCE APPLICATION ON THE CIVILIAN POPULATION BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE DURING THE RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR IN AUGUST OF 2008**

**Abstract.** *The purpose of the research* is to analyze the tools of interaction between the Russian side of the conflict and the civilian population of South Ossetia during the Russo-Georgian War in August of 2008; to determine the features of Russia's informational impact on the civilians before and during hostilities. The main instrument of influence was the Russian propaganda, which was conducted before the conflict actively. The paramount ultimate goal of Russia's information operations was to form in the international community the idea of Georgia as an aggressor state, which launched hostilities on its own territory against another ethnic minority. **The methodology of the research** is based on the general scientific principles of historicism, objectivity, systematicity, determinism and historical and logical dialectical unity. The main research methods are: generalization, logical and chronological analysis, periodization, as well as a special method of historical research: historical comparative. The following methods have been used: structural and functional analysis, search, formal

logical, system structural, and analytical. **The scientific novelty** is that for the first time the analysis of historical open sources was carried out, which described the methods and tools of information and psychological influence on the civilian population of South Ossetia used by the Russian Federation before and during the Russo-Georgian War in August of 2008 based on the studied source base using modern methodological approaches. The carried out research confirmed Russia's non-compliance with the norms of the international and humanitarian law, general provisions on human rights and the generally accepted principles and methods of military civil cooperation during the conflict. On the contrary, the Russian Federation special units used all possible methods in order to gather intelligence, organize systematic informational and psychological influence on the civilian population to form an opinion about the aggressor state Georgia and establish full control of the Russian Federation in South Ossetia. **The Conclusions.** The analysis revealed that the Russian Federation builds relationships with its neighbours, as with former colonies, without considering them as fully sovereign states. In order to achieve its goals, the Russian Federation uses separatism and irredentist claims in neighbouring countries. During the Russo-Georgian War, the main tools of influence on the civilian population of South Ossetia were the Russian propaganda and the confusion in facts. During the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, neither side established centers of civil and military cooperation due to the transiency of the conflict and the Russian Federation's unwillingness to develop civilized approaches to resolve the conflict and make peace. The lack of interaction between the civilian population and the military led to a large amount of inaccurate and falsified data on the exact number of losses of both parties and victims among the local population, which allowed the Russian propaganda to manipulate the consciousness of their own citizens and the opinion of the world community, deliberately increasing the number of victims, and thus, increase hatred and aggression against the Georgian side.

**Key words:** civil and military cooperation, information struggle, hybrid war, the Russian aggression, Russo-Georgian War in August of 2008.

## **ЗАСТОСУВАННЯ ІНФОРМАЦІЙНОГО ВПЛИВУ НА ЦИВІЛЬНЕ НАСЕЛЕННЯ РОСІЙСЬКОЮ СТОРОНОЮ У РОСІЙСЬКО-ГРУЗИНСЬКІЙ ВІЙНІ В СЕРПНІ 2008 р.**

**Анотація. Мета дослідження** – проаналізувати інструменти взаємодії між російською стороною конфлікту та цивільним населенням Південної Осетії під час російсько-грузинської війни у серпні 2008 р. Визначити особливості організації російського інформаційного впливу на цивільне населення до початку та під час бойових дій. Головним інструментом впливу була російська пропаганда, яка активно велась перед початком конфлікту. Головною прикінцевою метою інформаційних операцій Російської Федерації стало формування у міжнародній спільноті думки про Грузію як державу-агресора, що розпочала на власній території бойові дії проти іншої етнічної меншини. **Методологія дослідження** вибудовувалася із застосуванням загальнонаукових принципів історизму, об'єктивності, системності, детермінізму та діалектичної єдності історичного і логічного. Основними методами дослідження є: узагальнення, логічний та хронологічний аналіз, періодизація, а також спеціальний метод історичного дослідження: історико-порівняльний. У ході дослідження використовувалися: структурно-функціональний аналіз, пошуковий, формально-логічний, системно-структурний, аналітичний методи. **Наукова новизна.** На основі дослідженої джерельної бази з використанням сучасних методологічних підходів уперше здійснено аналіз відкритих історичних джерел, які описували способи й інструменти інформаційно-психологічного впливу на цивільне населення Південної Осетії застосовані РФ до та під час російсько-грузинської війни серпня 2008 р. Проведене дослідження підтвердило недотримання РФ норм міжнародного, гуманітарного права, загальних положень про права людини та загальноприйнятих сьогодні принципів і методів військово-цивільного співробітництва під час конфлікту. Навпаки, спеціальними підрозділами РФ було застосовано всі можливі методи щодо збору розвідувальної інформації, організації системного інформаційно-психологічного впливу на цивільне населення для формування думки про державу-агресора Грузію та встановлення повного контролю РФ у Південній Осетії. **Висновки.** Проведений аналіз виявив, що РФ вибудовує взаємовідносини зі своїми сусідами як з колишніми колоніями, не розглядаючи їх як повністю суверенні держави. Для досягнення своїх

цілей РФ використовує сепаратизм та іредентистські претензії у сусідніх державах. Під час російсько-грузинської війни головним інструментом впливу на цивільне населення Південної Осетії була російська пропаганда та плутанина у фактажі. У ході російсько-грузинської війни 2008 р. жодною зі сторін не було створено центрів цивільно-військового співробітництва у зв'язку зі швидкоплинністю самого конфлікту та через небажання РФ формувати цивілізовані підходи до згортання конфлікту і встановлення миру. Відсутність налагодженої взаємодії між цивільним населенням та військовими стала причиною появи великої кількості недостовірних і сфальсифікованих даних щодо точної кількості втрат обох сторін та жертв серед місцевого населення – це уможливило маніпулювання органами російської пропаганди свідомістю власних громадян та думкою світової спільноти, свідомо збільшувати кількість жертв і у такий спосіб посилювати ненависть і агресію до дій грузинської сторони.

**Ключові слова:** військово-цивільне співробітництво, інформаційна боротьба, гібридна війна, російська агресія, російсько-грузинська війна серпня 2008 р.

**The Problem Statement.** The main goal of the Russian Federation is military and political dominance in the post-Soviet space, which is achieved with the help of the simultaneous use of the “concept of a strong state” and “soft power”. The policy is implemented by means of the “buffer zones” and “instability zones” creation; redistribution of influence spheres; splitting the existing alliances and preventing new alliances; acquisition of new markets. Georgia is a vivid example of one of the objects of the “strong state concept” implementation. In August of 2008, regular military units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (RF) invaded the territory of Georgia, which became an act of military aggression in accordance with international law. The military operation was conducted under the slogan of forcing Georgia to peace, was planned and prepared by the top military and political leadership of the Russian Federation carefully (Khatiashvili, 2018). Establishing communication between the civilian population and the military at the beginning, during and after the conflict is a modern civilized norm related to the observance of the basic principles of international, humanitarian law and general provisions on human rights. Communication is also a fundamental area of a civil and military cooperation, which is most often carried out through the centers of civil and military cooperation, which are equipped outside the location of the military units and subdivisions. Access to such centers is open to the local population and the civil society organizations’ representatives. In case of conflict, communication takes place through coordination meetings and during citizens’ appeals (Daniel & Wittichová, 2020). During the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, none of the parties of the conflict established centers of civil and military cooperation due to the ephemerality of the conflict. The lack of interaction between the civilian population and the military led to a large number of unreliable and falsified data concerning the exact number of casualties, which allowed the Russian propaganda to increase the number of casualties in the eyes of the world community (Chobit, 2019).

**The Analysis of Recent Research Works.** The amount of research works related to the Russo-Georgian conflict is significant. In the Ukrainian historiography, the above-mentioned issue is poorly studied. The most prominent are the works written by A. Shumka “Information Confrontation during the Georgian-Russian Conflict” (August 8–12, 2008), which stated that the “coverage of events in Georgia and Russia was based on reporting only their own position” (Shumka, 2009), N. Nechaieva-Yuriichuk in “On the Causes and Probable Consequences of the Georgian-Russian Conflict in August of 2008”, stated that “the War was a manifestation of the imperfections of the modern system of the international relations”, A. Kyrydon “The Causes of the Russian-Georgian Conflict in 2008: the Global Dimension”, which identified clearly and analyzed the deep field of causes of conflict in the Caucasus and escalation into

war (Kyrydon, 2008). The Russian publications were not taken into account due to their bias. Among Western researchers there should be noted the works written by A. Cohen and R. Hamilton “The Russian Military and the War in Georgia” (Cohen & Hamilton, 2011), P. Shakarian’s “Russian Cyber Campaign against Georgia 2008” (Shakarian, 2011), T. Thomas “The Bear Went through the Mountain: Russia Estimates the Five-Day War in South Ossetia” (Thomas, 2009), R. McDermott’s “Russia’s Ordinary Armed Forces and the War in Georgia” (McDermott, 2009), A. Nicolle “Russia’s Rapid Reaction: A Short War Demonstrates the Lack of Modern Systems” (Nicolle, 2008), Ch. Blandy “Provocation, Deception, Capture: the Russo-Georgian Five-Day War” (Blandy, 2009), S. Cornell, N. Nilsson, J. Popjanevski, “Russian War in Georgia” (Cornell, Nilsson, Popjanevski, 2008), E. Lucas “New Cold War: Putin’s Russia and the Threat of the West” (Lucas, 2009), Ya. Rogoza “The Russian Propaganda War: the Media as a Weapon of Short-Range and Long-Range Action” (Rogoza, 2008), D. Hollis “An Example of Studying Cyber Warfare: Georgia 2008” (Hollis, 2011).

**The purpose of the research** is to analyze the tools of interaction between the Russian side of the conflict and the civilian population of South Ossetia during the conflict and to determine the features of Russia’s informational impact on the civilian population before and during hostilities.

**The Main Material Statement.** From the beginning of the 90s of the XXth century the Russian journalists and politicians waged a large-scale propaganda campaign against Georgia. When Putin came to power in 2000, former officers of the State Security Committee (KGB) and the Federal Security Service (FSB) appeared in all positions of Russia’s leading media, closely monitoring information policies in line with the official position of power. Georgia had been in the focus of the Russian propaganda since the end of the 1980s. Intensification happened during the period of 1992 – 1993, when the Russian special services conducted an operation to incite separatism, organize a war against the Georgian army, attract volunteers and the Cossack formations from the North Caucasus and Russia. At the same time, the first propaganda myths emerged, which a bit later turned into an information war with the use of the media. The Russian propaganda used the technology of “discrediting the enemy” to mislead the public with the beginning of preparations and during the war of 2008 (Sorokivska-Obikhod, 2019). Beginning with 2006, the Russian media reported frequently on President Saakashvili’s “madness”, the Georgian opposition’s plans to overthrow the current government, and Georgia’s preparations for terrorist acts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and even Russia. In August of 2008, a military attack was launched against Georgia in order to suppress objective information about the course of events. The Russian Federation’s paramount task was to change the pro-Western political leadership of Georgia and establish Russia’s control over its territory (Kyrydon, 2008).

The public opinion formation was conducted several months before the conflict. Georgia held presidential elections and a referendum on Georgia’s accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on January 5, 2008. As a result, 53.47% of voters elected the President M. Saakashvili, and 72.5% voted in favour of Georgia’s accession to NATO. M.Saakashvili delivered a speech at Munich Security Conference on February 9, 2008 and stated the following: “Kosovo is a unique case, different from the existing conflicts in Georgia”, which caused concern and criticism of the Russian leadership. On March 21, 2008, the Russian State Duma adopted a resolution calling for the Kremlin to consider recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the event of Georgia’s accession to NATO. On April 7, 2008, a decision was made to lift sanctions on Abkhazia and deepen economic and political

cooperation with the Russian Federation. On April 8, 2008, Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov stated that Ukraine and Georgia were not allowed to join NATO. At the same time, the leading Russian Federation media began to prepare public opinion actively for possible war and called for the protection of the Russian-speaking population and Russian citizens in Georgia and reunification with “historical Russia” (Panfilov, 2020, pp. 367–421).

As a result, a large-scale military training, called “The Caucasus-2008” began in the North Caucasus Military District of the Russian Federation with the participation of 8 000 servicemen, 700 units of armored vehicles and ships of the Black Sea Fleet on July 15, 2008. During the military training in the printing house of the newspaper “Doblest” (Valor) of Motorized Rifle Division 19 the following leaflets were published: “Warrior, know the possible enemy!” with a description of the composition of the Georgian Armed Forces, which were distributed among the participants, who took part in the military training. On July 20, 2008 the first cyber attacks against Georgian state and information websites were recorded, for example, the website of the President of Georgia was blocked for 24 hours (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia Report, 2009). Teimuraz Mamsurov, North Ossetian President announced that the Russian troops would enter Georgia in order to protect the Russian citizens and help peacekeepers on July 26, 2008. On August 2, 2008, four film crews from central Russian television channels (15 journalists) arrived in Tskhinvali from the Russian Federation. Due to the document problems the foreign journalists were allegedly banned from entering Tskhinvali. On August 7, there were already 50 journalists in Tskhinvali (Illarionov, 2009). Tskhinvali civilian population’s evacuation and surrounding villages by the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MOE) began on August 2, 2008, and by August 7, about 20,000 people had been evacuated to Russia, representing 90% of the population’s area. As the only route from Tskhinvali to Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia) was through the Roki Tunnel, the passage of the Russian military equipment could have been blocked if the civilians’ evacuation had not been carried out in advance (Sukhumi.info, 2018). The mobilization of volunteers, who assigned to the 19th Motorized Rifle Division and the North Ossetian Peacekeeping Battalion, began at the North Caucasus conscription stations on August 3, 2008. On August 4, 2008, 300 volunteers crossed the border to Georgia, and a blog called “Golos Dushi” (The Voice of the Soul) was launched announcing the evacuation to North Ossetia. On August 6, 2008, all institutions and shops in Tskhinvali were closed. On August 7, 2008, “Golos Dushi” blog published a report on the hostilities outbreak (Golos Dushi. Livejournal, 2008). On August 7, 2008, the Supreme Ataman of the Don Army, V. Vodolatsky announced that the formation of the Cossack battalions of volunteers began and they planned to arrive in South Ossetia. On August 7, 2008, Georgian General G. Karkarashvili received information from the military, the local population and representatives of the Provisional Administration of South Ossetia that “for the Russian troops to invade Georgia about 400 people must die”. In addition, the Georgian-Ossetian-Russian War forum of the Milkavkaz.net website also started working, announcing the outbreak of hostilities. The conflict itself began with the clashes between the Georgian and South Ossetian forces on August 7, 2008. The Georgian troops fired artillery at Tskhinvali and surrounding villages, followed by attacks carried out by ground and air forces. On August 8, 2008, units of the 58th Army of the Russian Armed Forces invaded South Ossetia, and the Russian artillery and aircraft struck targets on undisputed Georgian territory. On August 10, 2008, the Georgian command ordered the units to withdraw from South Ossetia. On August 12, 2008, the Russian units that were located in the south of the administrative

border with South Ossetia occupied the town of Gori. During a separate operation from the west through Abkhazia, the Russian forces occupied the Georgian cities of Poti, Zugdidi and Senaki (Panfilov, 2020, pp. 521–530).

According to a picture formed up by local media, there were two simultaneous conflicts in August of 2008: in Georgia, television and newspapers portrayed a country fighting against Russia's blatant aggression and defending its territorial integrity; in Russia, national television and print media portrayed Georgia as an aggressor and reported on the ethnic cleansing of the Ossetians and assistance to them by the Russian units. The Russian television channels broadcasted numerous destructions in Tskhinvali live and reported about 2 000 civilians killed (Rossiyskaya gazeta: Nedelya, 2008; Newsru.com, 2017). As part of the propaganda War, the Russian side created strong images of the enemy – Georgia, the Georgians, President M. Saakashvili and the collective image of the West, using the following concepts: “we” – “our state / homeland / nation”, which was opposed to “they” – “rival, the enemy” (Tønnessen & Kolstø, 2012). Diverse Russian media reports highlighted the “savagery and barbaric behaviour of the Georgians, who were shooting at the peaceful sleeping city of Tskhinvali”, alleging that “the Georgian military shouted in excitement, killing the Ossetian women and children” (Kolstø & Rusetskii, 2012). The Russian media also ignored M. Saakashvili's televised address on a unilateral ceasefire two hours before the start of hostilities (Thomas, 2009).

In both countries there were made attempts in order to provide real information to the public. The Georgian weekly “Quiris Palette” posted photos of the destruction in Gora, signing the photos the following: “The Barbarism of Peacekeepers in the XXIst Century. The Fascists!” But there were no photos of the destruction in Tskhinvali. A bit later it was reported that “it was the Russian military that fired on and destroyed Tskhinvali”. The Russian forces were portrayed as an occupier, who attacked Georgia suddenly in order to destroy democracy and independence. The Russian media did not mention the Georgian cities bombing at all. The Russian citizens saw only some scenes of destruction in Tskhinvali, which were accompanied by the interviews with the refugees – the Ossetians exclusively. Numerous stories were published on the Russian military that responded to Tbilisi's provocations in time and defended the Ossetians, portraying them as peacekeepers exclusively, while describing the savage behaviour of the Georgian military. Even the British BBC contributed to the confusion. Tim Whewell, the journalist in his report on the events in Georgia showed the public, on the one hand, an Ossetian mother who lost her son, and on the other hand, a conversation between the Georgian Foreign Minister, although he had previously visited many Georgian refugee families. Neither the Georgian nor the Russian TV and radio audiences were informed about the details and preconditions of the conflict. As a result, ordinary Georgians formed a strong belief that Russia had invaded Georgia suddenly and unjustifiably, and the ordinary Russians had the impression that the Georgians came up with stories of shooting, destruction, and casualties. The media on both sides presented only a “black and white” picture. According to the Georgian media, only the Ossetian and the Russian militias committed robberies, and the Georgians were victims of looting. The Russian media spread stories about gangs of Georgian looters in South Ossetia. The decision of the Georgian government to block access to the Russian TV channels and websites on the .ru domain from August of 11 helped the Georgian society significantly to form a one-sided picture of the situation (Akhvlediani, 2009).

The International Non-Governmental Organisation “Human Rights Watch” carried out a thorough investigation of the conflict after the end of hostilities. According to the organization's

report the following was: a) the Russian servicemen were disciplined and protected civilians from the Ossetian militants and looters, although there were also individual cases of the Russian military involvement in looting Georgian homes; b) although the Ossetian civilians reported robberies, there were no reports on any specific cases of ill-treatment of the Georgian units during the offensive; c) the Ossetian militias looted and burned houses in Georgian villages – it continued until November of 2008 periodically (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Insinuations about the death toll in the Russian media were the subject of active debate in Russian society. The initial number of 2 000 civilians, who were killed in South Ossetia was broadcasted in the media constantly and became the basis for accusing Georgia of genocide against the Ossetian people. However, information about 162 deaths was published on the Russian prosecutor's office's website in the fall of 2008, the Russian media and officials continued to claim that there were 2 000 victims. On August 22, Russia's news agency "Regnum" released a poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, according to which 94 % said that Russian television was their main source of information, and 61 % said that Russian television was impartial in the conflict (Panfilov, 2020, pp. 89–90).

The "United Nations Institute for Training and Research" was a part of a research programme using geospatial information technology for decision-making for peace and security, the "United Nations Satellite Center" (UNOSAT) with the participation of representatives of the organization "Human Rights Watch" analyzed satellite images, which were obtained in Georgia on August 10–22, 2008. The photos showed that the destruction of Tskhinvali was 5.5%, and the Georgian villages – 50%. In conclusion, it was stated that most of the damage and destruction was caused by fires, not combat operations (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

On September 7, 2008, Russia's "Novaya Gazeta" published excerpts from a UNOSAT report, which showed that the chronicle of the destruction of Georgian villages was the following: on August 10, after the end of hostilities, the village of K'wemet near Tskhinvali was arsoned; on August 12, the villages of Pirsi, Berulya, Eredvi, Kehvi, Kurta, Zemo-Achabeti, Tamarasheni were arsoned; on August 13, the Russian troops blocked a road south of Tskhinvali, burning the western part of the village of Eredvi, the village between Prineve and Avnevi, and the south of Kehvi, which was blocked by peacekeepers; on August 19, the villages of Kemerti, Kheiti, and Kvemo Achabeti were arsoned; on August 22, the villages of Berulya, Heiti, Dzarcevi, and Zemo Dodoti were arsoned. The UNOSAT experts enumerated 183 destroyed houses in Tamarashen, 88 destroyed and 33 damaged in Kvemo Achabet (51.9% of the total), 56 destroyed and 21 damaged in Zemo Achabet (41.6%), 123 destroyed and 21 damaged in Kurt (43.4%), 110 destroyed and damaged in 44 Kehvi (44.3%), 71 destroyed and 25 damaged in Kemert (30.6%); 25 destroyed and 8 damaged in Dzarcevi (15.3%) (Stern, 2009). According to "The Human Rights Watch" spokeswoman Anna Neistat, "the Ossetian volunteer groups said in talks that they were destroying the Georgian villages to prevent the return of refugees". On August 27, 2008, the organization issued a press release stating that Russia should have found those responsible for the destruction of the Georgian villages in South Ossetia and bring them to justice (Human rights watch, 2009). "The Human Rights Watch" also published testimonies from residents of the Georgian villages arsoned by the Ossetians: "The Ossetians left cars on the street, at first they looted, then brought hay, put it in a house and arsoned it" (Zhuzhuna Chulukhidze, 76, Upper Achavet); "The Ossetian militias beat me, looted my house, then brought gasoline and set it on fire" (Ilya Chulukhadze, 84, Nizhny Achaveti); "The Ossetians first took everything out of my house, then brought hay

and set it on fire, they didn't even let us take the documents" (Tamara Khutsinashvili, 69, Tamarasheni) (Stern, 2009).

"The Human Rights Watch" report, eyewitness testimonies, and analysis of media reports showed that the civilian population's cooperation with the parties to the conflict wasn't established during the Russo-Georgian War. The exchange of information and objective coverage is a function of civil and military cooperation and should take place at the level of local administrations, governments, international organizations, governmental and non-governmental organizations in order to create favorable conditions for planning and coordinating their activities. In the case of the Russo-Georgian War, the main tool for influencing the civilian population of South Ossetia was the Russian propaganda, which confused the facts (Human rights watch, 2009).

The measures taken by the Georgian civilian government and military leadership facilitated the immediate cause of the Russian invasion of Georgia. The War illustrated the gulf between civil society, the government, and the military. The plans for possible military clashes in South Ossetia were developed and worked out by the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces a few years before events of 2008. When it became clear that the Russian units were advancing deep into Georgia, these plans were ignored, and pre-training teams were formed that did not have prior training and did not have a common system of communication. The General Staff and civilian leaders of the Ministry of Defense, instead of acting from the command center, moved to the unequipped headquarters of the artillery unit near Tskhinvali. Due to a lack of communication and situational awareness of the conflict in real-time, the top civilian leadership issued controversial orders and failed to summon the necessary forces to stop the Russian invasion. There was also no civil and military cooperation between the Georgian military units and the civilian population of the Georgian villages in the War zone (Darchiashvili & Mangum, 2019). Information is exchanged and disseminated during conflicts with the help of the media, radio and television in order to inform the local population and other representatives of the civil sector about the presence and activities of the military in order to prevent the opposition from them. The above-mentioned aspect of civil and military cooperation in the Russo-Georgian War was completely absent (Chobit, 2019; Pater, 2018).

**The Conclusions.** The analysis revealed that the Russian Federation builds relationships with its neighbours, as with former colonies, without considering them as fully sovereign states. In order to achieve its goals, the Russian Federation uses separatism and irredentist claims in neighbouring countries. During the Russo-Georgian War, the main tools of influence on the civilian population of South Ossetia were the Russian propaganda and the confusion in facts. During the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, neither side established centers of civil and military cooperation due to the transiency of the conflict and the Russian Federation's unwillingness to develop civilized approaches to resolve the conflict and make peace. The lack of interaction between the civilian population and the military led to a large amount of inaccurate and falsified data on the exact number of losses of both parties and victims among the local population, which allowed the Russian propaganda to manipulate the consciousness of their own citizens and the opinion of the world community, deliberately increasing the number of victims and thus increase hatred and aggression against the Georgian side.

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