

Georgia: Fake TV Report Storm

Author: [Lela Iremashvili](#)

Hapless broadcaster's "Russian invasion" prank leaves opposition and diplomats fuming. By Lela Iremashvili in Tbilisi

Producers of a fake Georgian television news item, which reported a Russian invasion, have drawn criticism for their stunt, which the opposition saw as an attempt to undermine it ahead of local elections.

Imedi television, a private company of unclear ownership, aired the report on March 14. Over stock footage from the 2008 Russia-Georgian war, they announced that tanks were on their way to Tbilisi, that President Mikhail Saakashvili had been killed, and a government including former speaker turned opposition leader Nino Burjanadze had taken power.

Although the report was bracketed by clear warnings that it was not true, the public panicked. Mobile networks were jammed as Georgians sought confirmation.

That same evening, a large crowd gathered outside the studios and Manana Manjgaladze, spokeswoman for Saakashvili, strongly criticised the show and denied any government involvement in it.

"Imedi should have abided by the standards established by law, and for the whole 'news broadcast' there should have had a clear message on the screen that it was an invention," she said.

But her words did nothing to placate opposition activists like Burjanadze, who saw the report as a government attempt to slur them before municipal and local elections scheduled for May, which will be an important measure of the government's popularity.

"The script for this falsified special report was written by Mikhail Saakashvili, since no one at this channel would have conducted such a provocation without his approval," Burjanadze said.

"The authorities want to scare the people with the Russian threat so as to hide the complete failure of their policies."

Zurab Nogaideli, a second opposition leader and a former prime minister who was also credited with forming the government in the fake report, said he was not surprised by the cynicism of the attack.

"This report on Imedi is a continuation of a two-month campaign of political-psychological terror aiming to make the opposition resemble an enemy," he said.

But it would appear that if the report was indeed intended to cast them as pro-Russian before the elections, it failed to harm their standing with the voters.

"This has worked against the authorities. And also, as a result, it reduced the pro-western and anti-Russian mood. This does not mean, however, that people are pro-Russian," said Giorgi Khukhashvili, head of the Centre for Social Projects, a think-tank.

He said it was not clear whether the anger against the trick would last. "But in any case it has not harmed the opposition," he said.

The European Union and the British ambassador, Denis Keefe, archive footage of whom featured in the broadcast, have expressed strong criticism of Imedi.

"Neither I, nor the UK government, had any involvement in or foreknowledge of an irresponsible programme that unnecessarily caused deep concern amongst the Georgian public. I consider Imedi TV's misuse of this footage to be a discourtesy to me as ambassador of the United Kingdom in Georgia, reflecting badly on Georgia's reputation for responsible and independent media," Keefe said in a statement.

"I would be grateful if Imedi TV would make clear as soon as possible, on air, and with the same prominence that they gave to the original report, that this footage was not genuine and that it was used without my consent or knowledge."

The EU, which monitors the ceasefire signed between Russia and Georgia after their war of 2008, said in a statement, "Our monitors have witnessed the anxiety and concern of the local population for their security

and safety caused by this incident.

“This type of irresponsible programming has the potential to seriously destabilise the situation close to the [front] lines. Dangerous and significant incidents could have occurred. We call on all those with positions of responsibility to fully consider the implications of their actions in future. It must be in everyone’s interest to ensure that security and stability are maintained.”

Giorgi Arveladze, director of Imedi and a former head of Saakashvili’s administration, was quick to apologise after the broadcast. “The simulated news was shocking for the population. We understand this and ask for their forgiveness,” he said.

Lela Iremashvili is a freelance journalist.

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