

THE 2008 SOUTH OSSETIA WAR:  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF IMAGE RESTORATION STRATEGIES  
USED BY THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT

A RESEARCH PAPER  
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RESEARCH PAPER: The 2008 South Ossetia war: A content analysis of image restoration strategies used by the Russian government

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This study analyzed communication efforts of the Russian government during the recent war in South Ossetia, using image restoration theory by William Benoit. Image restoration theory describes communication options available for organizations or people whose reputation is threatened.

The present study used quantitative and qualitative content analysis to investigate the use of image restoration strategies in press releases issued by the Russian Federation's Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Emergency Situation as disseminated through the official website of the Ministry of Defense. The study also analyzed how the use of these strategies changed over time during the conflict.

All occurrences of Benoit's image restoration strategies found in press releases were coded. These strategies included denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, each of them included subcategories.

The study findings demonstrated that the Russian government relied heavily on the reducing offensiveness strategy, specifically, on such individual subcategories as attacking accuser and compensation. In the early stages of the conflict Russian officials also utilized the denial strategy, whereas during the middle stage of the conflict the Russian government emphasized corrective action. After the ceasefire agreement was signed, compensation gained in popularity.

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was run to examine the differences between the preferences in image restoration strategy across three stages of the conflict. It revealed statistically significant differences between the choice of image restoration strategy at different stages of the conflict.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

South Ossetia is a tiny breakaway enclave in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, which suddenly came into prominence in the international media at the beginning of August 2008.

Georgian troops made an incursion deep into South Ossetia, firing at the capital of the enclave Tskhinvali. Georgian officials claimed that the incursion was not a premeditated attack, but rather a response to continuous provocations from the South Ossetian secessionists (Schwartz 2008). A few days before this event, a truck with Georgian police officers was blown up and ethnic Georgian villages were attacked by the Ossetian forces. The direct talks between Georgian and South Ossetian officials scheduled for 7 August 2008 never took place, as the Russian diplomat who was to facilitate the talks did not show up (*The Economist*, 14 August 2008).

Exactly what happened on the night of 7 August 2008 is still unclear. Russian officials claimed that President Saakashvili of Georgia broke the ceasefire between Georgians and Ossetians by ordering a full-scale offensive on Tskhinvali, which killed hundreds of civilians and Russian peacekeepers stationed in the South Ossetian capital (Schwartz et al. 2008).

Russian soldiers were deployed in the enclave according to the terms of the ceasefire between Georgia and South Ossetia, which Russia had mediated in 1992 (Toft 2003, 120). Declaring the protection of Russian citizens its first priority, Russia moved its troops and armored vehicles across the border into South Ossetia.

President Saakashvili lifted the ceasefire only after obtaining information about the Russian army's movement through the Roki tunnel that connects Russia to South Ossetia (*The Economist*, 14 August 2008).

The conflict escalated quickly and Russian bombers targeted several military and civilian sites within Georgia on 8 August 2008. Russian tank, artillery, and reconnaissance units managed to push the Georgians back and captured Tskhinvali. In the next five days, Russian forces crushed the Georgian army, blockaded important Georgian ports on the Black Sea, and occupied several Georgian cities.

Georgia and Russia signed a ceasefire negotiated by French President Sarkozy, and by the end of August, Russia withdrew its troops to the position they had occupied before the war broke out. Russia formally recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another rebellious region within Georgia. This move was condemned by Georgia and criticized by many Western countries (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "South Ossetia").

By invading another independent country for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia seriously damaged its reputation. In the first week of the South Ossetia crisis, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) decided to suspend cooperation with the Kremlin until the end of its military action. The United States canceled military exercises with Russia. Russian hopes of obtaining membership into the World Trade Organization in 2008 were dashed, as Georgia threatened to block Russia's entry (*The Irish Times*, 12 August 2008).

Using Benoit's image restoration theory (Benoit 1995), the present study examined the image restoration strategies utilized by the Russian government during the five-week period from 8 August 2008 to 11 September 2008. This study also investigated whether the choice of the strategy depended on the stage of crisis using Ramsbotham's hourglass model of conflict evolution, as a basis (Ramsbotham 2005).

Image restoration theory, grounded on both communication studies and social psychology, has been successfully applied to analyze image repair strategies used by celebrities and politicians such as Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, and Hugh Grant, as well as organizations and companies such as Duke University and AT&T (Benoit 1995, Benoit and Brinson 1994, Fortunato 2008). At present, however, the number of research studies applying Benoit's theory to the analysis of governmental crises is limited.

The present study is important as it quantifies the Russian government's choice of communication strategies during a crisis. The Russian government was criticized sharply for its role in the war in South Ossetia, and this study speculates that the Russian government might have chosen one or more image restoration strategies to repair its image. A content analysis of press releases issued by the Russian Federation's Ministry of Defense explores this hypothesis.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Fearn-Banks (2002) defined a crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name" (2). Mitroff et al. (2006) described war-related crises as of human origin, and they share most features with other crisis types. Such crises appear suddenly, escalate in intensity, demand quick reaction, disrupt an organization's routine and performance, and threaten the organization's reputation (Millar and Smith 2002).

Crisis communication researchers have been attempting to develop a universal crisis communications theory. Many modern crisis communication approaches draw from the excellence theory developed in the works of Grunig and his co-authors. Grunig et

al. (1992) proposed four models of public relations: (a) press agency or publicity, (b) public information, (c) two-way asymmetric, and (d) two-way symmetric models. Two-way symmetric communication, researchers have suggested, is the most ethical and effective model for achieving public relations goals.

Fearn-Banks (2002) believed that the basis for the excellence in crisis communication is crisis preparedness and openness:

An organization that anticipates, through crisis inventory, the precise type of crisis will suffer less financial, emotional, and perceptual damage than the organization that does not. An organization that maintains the reputation of having an overall "open and honest" policy with stakeholders and the news media will suffer less financial, emotional and perceptual damage than the organization that does not. (21)

The major dilemma in the field of crisis communication is the question of whether the organization should allow attorneys and financial specialists to define communication policy or rely on communication specialists during the crisis. Many authors in the field (e.g., Marra 1998, Fearn-Banks 2002, Coombs 2006) have stated that crisis communication policy must be shaped by communication professionals. Marra (1998) suggested that "organizations that allow attorneys, legal personnel or financial specialists to determine communication policy during a crisis may survive later battles in a court of law, but often fail miserably in the court of public opinion." (8)

Covello (2003) argued that the spokesperson must always be "truthful, honest, frank and open" (6), and supported the notion that the spokesperson's goal is to "fill information vacuums" (ibid., 7) during the crisis.

Ruff and Aziz (2003) analyzed communications strategies during a war as a particular case of crisis communications and concluded that the old military doctrine of "we will only tell them things when we have won" (83) cannot be effective anymore. They speculated that NATO's operation in Serbia was the first example of a new, media-friendly crisis communication campaign. Ruff and Aziz identified four elements of a successful crisis communication during the war: (a) rebuttal, or identifying and responding to the enemy information; (b) lines or catchy phrases for spokespeople to use; (c) talking heads or ghosted articles from senior NATO leaders to appear in the media; and (d) the "grid" - twice-daily conference calls between Brussels, the headquarters of NATO, and key national capitals to coordinate messaging.

Mankiewicz (2002) found common elements between the Pentagon's communication strategy during the military operation in Afghanistan and the Office of War Information's strategy during World War II. Mankiewicz argued that the key elements of successful communication in wartime are the ability to counter

the enemy's propaganda efforts and to speak directly to the enemy's audience using modern communication channels.

Image restoration theory has become one of the most prolific branches in crisis communication research today. Smudde and Courtright (2008) compiled seven books and more than 40 articles applying image restoration theory to various crises. The literature on image restoration theory is not limited to this number, however, and many social scientists from other disciplines utilized the theory as well (Rowland and Jerome 2004, Stephens, Malone, and Bailey 2005). The most productive author within the image restoration theory discourse remains its founder William Benoit.

The foundation of image restoration theory was established in the late 1950s, when Robert P. Abelson (1959) proposed the classification of intrapersonal conflict resolution types such as denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Nine years later, Scott and Lyman (1968) proposed the idea of accounts or "excuses and justifications, each with its own subtypes" (47). The third important work that predated Benoit's work was Ware and Linkugel's (1973) article introducing the concept of apologia, or self-defense speech. Ware and Linkugel suggested that Abelson's conflict resolution types may be applied to organizational self-defense.

Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory proposed five broad categories of image recovery: (a) denial, (b) evasion of responsibility, (c) reducing offensiveness, (d) corrective action, and (e) mortification. Scapegoating was added to the model later (Brinson and Benoit 1999a) and was precluded from the present study. The questions that help to select an appropriate strategy are, "What accusations or suspicions threaten the image, and who is or are the most important audiences? If the audience is not aware of an accusation, that accusation can safely be ignored unless you think they will hear it later" (Benoit 2005, 407).

Benoit (1997) described the basic concepts of his theory and suggested that it could be used as a working model for corporate communications during crises. Benoit pointed out that the accused should not necessarily respond to the accusations, and that the response must match the attack.

Coombs (2000) developed the original typology of crisis response strategies, which is partly based on image restoration theory. Coombs' classification of strategies is defined by the level of responsibility acceptance. For example, the strategy that assumes the highest level of responsibility is full apology, whereas the most defensive strategies are denial and attacking the accuser.

Zhang and Benoit (2004) applied image restoration theory to Saudi Arabia's attempt to restore its reputation after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. They found that Saudi Arabia managed to partially defend itself against the accusations of supporting terrorism by relying largely on the strategies of denial and bolstering. These strategies, however, were less successful against the accusation of failing to support the military operation in Iraq.

Len-Rios and Benoit (2004) examined the image repair strategies used by Congressman Gary Condit, who was accused of an indecent relationship with a missing Washington intern, Chandra Levy. The authors established that Condit's strategy, which heavily relied on denial, was very ineffective. An attempt to shift the blame did not improve the situation.

Rowland and Jerome (2004) analyzed the differences between eulogies and organizational apologia and pointed out that there was little variation among eulogies, as their primary goal is to comfort stakeholders and help them to cope with a loss. Organizational apologia, which includes all categories of strategies proposed by Benoit, is more versatile. The authors argued that a skillful crisis communication practitioner must combine all apologia subgenres (e.g., the image repair strategies proposed by Benoit), rather than relying on a single strategy.

Seeger (2002) and Seeger and Ulmer (2002) applied chaos theory to the field of crisis communication. They concluded that exact predictions and suggestions regarding system performance were not possible, and that traditional crisis communication typologies are of little or no help. Chaos theory views crisis as a natural stage of system evolution or a precursor of the system's renewal. While crises are difficult to predict, they are nevertheless necessary and beneficial for an organization, as they help the system to achieve a higher degree of order.

In a more recent study, Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007) critically assessed image restoration theory. They identified renewal as an important addition to image restoration in the post-crisis discourse. Renewal discourse is focused on what will happen next and how the organization will move forward, while image restoration is more concerned with the past. Another limitation of image restoration research, the authors noted, is that accusations may represent only a small share of crisis-related messages; thus, post-crisis communication must include image restoration and the discourse of renewal.

Hearit (2006) analyzed the differences between individual and institutional approaches to image restoration. He argued that institutions were less likely to apologize for mistakes, as they operate on different time scale; thus, acknowledgment of

wrongdoing is more dangerous for organizations than for individuals.

Fortunato (2008) examined the image repair efforts of Duke University during the lacrosse team scandal and found that while multiple image restoration strategies were used by the university simultaneously, Duke's overall response was to accept responsibility and utilize corrective action as the primary strategy. While Fortunato did not examine the effectiveness of Duke's communication efforts, he noted that the organization relied on the most ethical practices of image restoration during this crisis and did not use denial or evasion of responsibility.

In several works Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2001, 2002) proposed a symbolic approach to crisis management. They attempted to establish a correspondence between an organization's performance history, type of crisis, and crisis response strategy. Coombs and Holladay argued that only a negative relationship history affected organizational reputation.

Coombs and Holladay (2008) suggested that it was unfair to group denial and excuse with apology, as the latter is considered more ethical. Instead, they compared apology to other equivalent response strategies and concluded that people react similarly to other victim-centered strategies such as sympathy and compensation.

Having analyzed the existing body of knowledge on image restoration theory, Smudde and Courtright (2008) concluded that the categories of image restoration theory and individual image restoration strategies were not used with equal frequency; rather, some strategies were utilized more often than others. For example, public relations practitioners and organizations rely on the "reducing offensiveness" category more than on any other, while corrective action is relatively underutilized.

Yang et al. (2008) applied image restoration theory to cultural communication. They tried to build a reliable measurement model of country reputation and establish which communication channels must be used in country reputation management. They described seven major dimensions of country reputation and noted the following:

From the perspective of nation branding ... a country should establish and manage its reputation to have the global brand equivalent to that enjoyed by a company. With favorable country reputation, a country can influence international consumers' willingness to purchase products or brands made in the country from the country-of-origin perspective. (Yang et al. 2008, 422)

Many models of the crisis life cycle have been proposed in the crisis management literature. Fink (1986) described four stages of a crisis life cycle: (a) prodromal, or when clues or hints that a crisis exists and begins to emerge; (b) crisis breakout, or an acute or a triggering event of the crisis; (c)

chronic, or when the crisis progresses; and (d) resolution, or when the crisis is no longer a concern to stakeholders. Sturges (1994) argued that different stages of the crisis life cycle require different crisis communication approaches. For example, stakeholders may require additional information in the early stages of a crisis, such as how to protect themselves or what to do, while the final stages provide the opportunity for an organization to bolster its image or express concern to the victims.

Ramsbotham et al. (2005) analyzed many military conflicts and proposed an hourglass model that characterizes the stages of conflict. They argued that each stage of a crisis requires the appropriate response:

Conflict transformation is seen to encompass the deepest levels of cultural and structural peacebuilding. Conflict settlement corresponds to what we call "elite peacemaking" - in other words mediation among the main protagonists with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable agreement. Conflict containment includes preventive peacekeeping, war limitation and post-ceasefire peacekeeping. (Ramsbotham et al., 2005, 12-13)

Ramsbotham and co-authors developed a model that illustrates the phases of the conflict and the approaches that should be taken at each stage of the conflict (*Fig.1*). They identified four stages of conflict escalation (difference, contradiction, polarisation, and violence), the highest peak of the conflict

(war), and four corresponding stages of de-escalation (ceasefire, agreement, normalization, and reconciliation). According to Ramsbotham et al. (2005),

The hourglass represents the narrowing of political space that characterizes conflict escalation, and the widening of political space that characterizes conflict de-escalation. As the space narrows and widens, so different conflict resolutions responses become more or less appropriate or possible. (12)

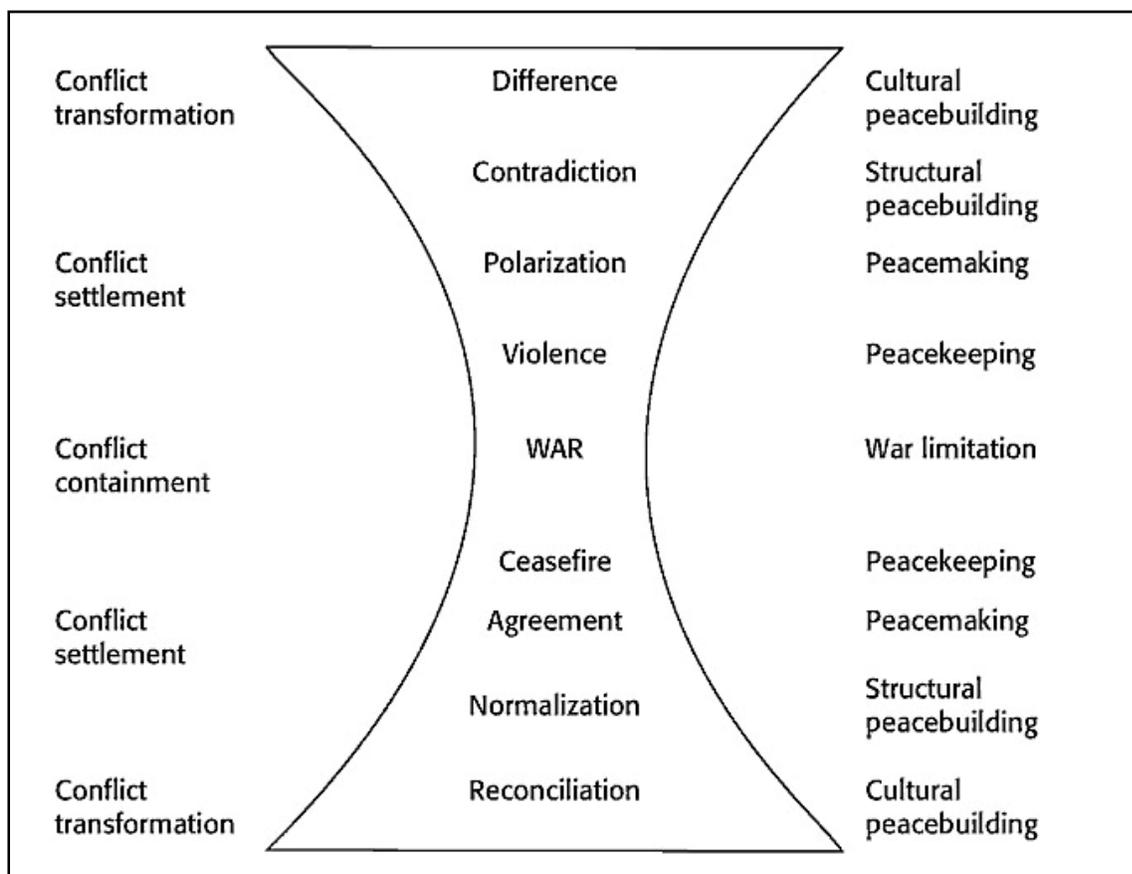


Fig. 1. The hourglass model: conflict containment, conflict settlement, and conflict resolution. Reprinted, by permission, from Ramsbotham, Oliver, Tom Woodhouse, and Hugh Miall. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 12.

Based on a review of the literature on image restoration theory and on Ramsbotham et al.'s hourglass model, the following research questions were proposed:

**RQ1:** Which image restoration strategies were chosen by the Russian government?

**RQ2:** Did the choice of strategy vary in different stages of the conflict?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The present study used quantitative and qualitative content analysis to investigate the use of image restoration strategies in press releases issued by the Russian Federation's Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Emergency Situations, as disseminated through the official website of the Ministry of Defense ([www.mil.ru](http://www.mil.ru)). The study also analyzed how the use of these strategies changed over time during the conflict.

This study examined five weeks of press releases from the beginning of the conflict until the moment that Russian troops fully withdrew from Georgia. The unit of analysis was individual press releases. The press releases were retrieved from the Web site [www.mil.ru](http://www.mil.ru), which is updated frequently. During the observed period, 1,609 press releases were issued, and 12.9% were selected for the present study's sample. To narrow the

topic, press releases that did not refer to the conflict directly were ignored. The 209 press releases that met the selection criteria were content analyzed.

Benoit's typology was selected as a framework for the analysis. All occurrences of Benoit's image restoration strategies found in the press releases were coded. These strategies included denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit 1995).

Stacks (2002) defined content analysis as "a systematic, objective, and quantitative method for researching messages" (107), and suggested that there were two levels of content analysis. Most content analysis studies involve only manifest content that is measurable, such as the size of photographs in magazines or the count of certain words. Another level, however, is latent content, where the researcher is interested in the underlying, deeper meaning of the message (Stacks 2002, 109). The present study analyzed both latent and manifest content.

Two trained coders, both graduate students familiar with the content analysis technique, analyzed the selected sample. Each coder worked independently with the help of a coding manual. The coders were asked to examine the content of the press releases and categorize them based on Benoit's typology. On the provided coding sheets, the coders were asked to code the date of the

press release, the time period, and the category of image restoration theory to which the press release belonged.

The coding manual that was developed contained a definition of each category and subcategory of Benoit's typology as well as samples of image restoration strategies. In all, 5 main categories and 14 individual strategies were developed. As Benoit's classification is non-exclusive, different image restoration strategies could be applied simultaneously, and thus a single unit of analysis could be coded into multiple categories. The coders later were asked to group press releases into three time periods, in order to test the model of conflict set forth by Ramsbotham et al. (2005, 12). This model implies that different stages of the conflict require different communication models. The five-week period was divided into three stages corresponding with the hourglass model proposed by Ramsbotham and co-authors.

The time frame from 8 August 2008 to 14 August 2008 represented the war period, with conflict containment being the choice for a conflict resolution strategy. The following two weeks (15 August 2008 to 28 August 2008), during which the ceasefire was brokered and the conflict evolved into the next stage, were combined, with conflict settlement being the response to the conflict. Finally, the press releases issued from 29 August 2008 to 11 September 2008 were combined to create

the third group, representing the stage of conflict transformation (Ramsbotham et al. 2005, 12). The analysis of image repair strategies used during these time frames was useful in determining whether the choice of strategy depended on the stage of the conflict.

Inter-coder reliability was established by randomly selecting 15% of sample press releases to analyze. Inter-coder reliability, calculated with the Holsti formula (Stacks 2002, 117), averaged 81.8%, which signifies an acceptable degree of agreement between coders.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

Each press release was analyzed using a qualitative and a quantitative content analysis. A total of 209 press releases issued between August 8, 2008 and September 10, 2008 were analyzed in the present study. The distribution of the identified IRT strategies is shown in Table 1. As the same unit of analysis (an individual press release) could have been coded into several categories, the sum of the percentages is greater than 100%.

As Table 1 demonstrates, Russian officials relied heavily on the reducing offensiveness category: fully 111 press releases out of 209, or 53.11%, belonged to this category. The most popular individual subcategory of image restoration chosen by the Russian government was corrective action seen in 76 of the 209 press releases, or 36.36%. It is interesting to observe that

the other two most popular individual strategies were shifting the blame (40 press releases out of 209, or 19.14%) and attacking accuser (38 press releases out of 209, or 18.18%).

**Table 1. Frequency of Image Restoration Strategies**

<b>Image Restoration Strategy</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Denial</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>32.06</b>
Simple Denial	27	12.92
Shifting the blame	40	19.14
<b>Evasion of responsibility</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>21.05</b>
Provocation	26	12.44
Defeasibility	4	1.91
Good Intentions	14	6.70
<b>Reducing offensiveness of event</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>53.11</b>
Minimization	14	6.70
Bolstering	14	6.70
Differentiation	6	2.87
Transcendence	13	6.22
Attack accuser	38	18.18
Compensation	26	12.44
<b>Corrective action</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>36.36</b>
<b>Mortification</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.96</b>

Denial appeared in the press releases frequently, as a strategy to combat rumors or when there was credible evidence to deny charges (Rowland and Jerome 2004, 195). A press release from 12 August 2008 provides a good example of a denial strategy:

Draftees do not participate in military actions in South Ossetia. All military personnel participating in the peace-enforcing operation consist of contract soldiers.

Rather than deny charges, Russian officials shifted the blame to another party, such as the Georgian army, President

Saakashvili, the US, Israel, or Ukraine. For instance, on 21 August 2008, Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated:

We (Russians) patiently and carefully tried to keep the peace and the territorial integrity of Georgia. The only party that undermined this integrity was Mikhail Saakashvili.

As Benoit noted, denial strategies such as simple denial and shifting the blame may work if no reprehensible act has occurred, and a successful denial may even restore one's image (Benoit 1995). In several cases, however, the denial strategy failed the Ministry of Defense, as the denied facts were later proven to be true, and the Ministry of Defense had to apologize for misinformation. For example, on 8 August 2008, Russians denied that any Russian planes were shot down by Georgian anti-aircraft units, but a day later they had to acknowledge this fact.

The organization that chooses evasion of responsibility or excuse as its primary communication strategy has four options: First, it may claim that its act was merely a response to another's offensive act, strategy of claiming provocation; second, it may allege that lack of information or control over events led to the crisis, a defeasibility strategy; third, it may claim that the act in question happened accidentally; or finally, it may assert that the offensive behavior was performed with good intentions (Benoit 1997).

Claiming provocation can be a successful strategy, if the speaker manages to prove that he or she was justifiably provoked (Benoit 1995, p.76). The statement from Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, the Deputy Chief of the Defense Staff, on 21 August 2008 can be classified as an example of the provocation strategy:

Only Russian military forces must serve as peacekeepers in South Ossetia because we always kept the terms of the 1992 peace agreement. Georgians violated this agreement and having done so, they lost their peacekeeping mandate.

Defeasibility strategy is used when the speaker claims that he or she did not control the situation to the full extent or was not fully informed about it. For example, Colonel General Nogovitsyn states, explaining the number of lost Russian aircraft (press release from 25 August 2008):

We could not effectively identify Georgian anti aircraft units as they were passively located, which made them hard to detect for our radars.

The speaker can use an appeal to accident, claiming that the crisis is an accident. The strategy is more common in industrial disasters, and as Coombs and Holladay (2002) noted, during accidents the speaker assumes low responsibility for a crisis. During the South Ossetia conflict there were no non-war related accidents such as an earthquake or tornado; as a result, this strategy was not utilized by the Russian government during the observed period.

An appeal to good intentions is a broad argument. As Benoit (1995) puts it,

Here the wrongful act is not denied, yet the audience is asked not to hold the actor fully responsible because it was done with good, rather than evil, intentions. People who do bad while trying to do good are usually not blamed as those who intend to do bad. (76-77)

The Russian government employed this strategy when answering to the accusations that it had overreacted. For example, a press release of 12 August 2008 stated:

The 58<sup>th</sup> Army will withdraw from South Ossetia after the cease-fire, said the Deputy Chief of Defense Staff Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn. According to Colonel General Nogovitsyn, 58<sup>th</sup> Russian Army moved to Georgia in order to support the Russian peacekeepers. Nogovitsyn said only 588 Russian peacekeepers were stationed in South Ossetia at the beginning of the conflict.

One category of evasion and denial strategies is that of "reducing offensiveness" (Benoit and Brinson 1999b). One strategy to reduce offensiveness is minimization; a speaker who utilizes the minimization strategy strives to downplay the extent of the damage. For example, after the Valdez oil spill an Exxon official told National Public Radio that Exxon had counted only 300 dead birds and 70 dead otters, while in fact tens of thousands of sea birds and otters were retrieved (Benoit 1997).

The Russian Ministry of Defense used the minimization strategy to show that its military response to Georgia was weaker than it might have been. The minimization strategy was also

applied in press releases reporting war losses. For example, a press release from 27 August 2008 states:

"We are not going to increase the number of our ships in the Georgian territorial waters, even though we can", said Colonel General Nogovitsyn. He also remarked that the presence of NATO ships in the Black Sea waters obstructed a peace process. "It is a pity that we have to stretch muscles," said Nogovitsyn, "although Russia differs now from what it used to be and we are not afraid of anybody."

Bolstering, which "attempts to improve the accused's reputation in hopes of offsetting or making up for the damage to the image from the undesirable act" (Benoit 1995, 73), falls under the reducing offensiveness category. Bolstering, according to Smudde and Courtright (2008, 5), is the most popular individual image repair strategy. It is frequently represented in the sample analyzed for the present study; for instance, on 13 August 2008, the Ministry of Defense issued the following press release:

Russian military forces in South Ossetia are not involved in military actions since 3:00 P.M. yesterday. All military units were ordered to stop, said Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn. In part, they are protecting transportation routes, primarily the Zary road, which is used for humanitarian aid delivery. The Russian military medical unit began work in Tskhinvali, said Nogovitsyn.

Differentiation, another reducing offensiveness strategy, involves a speaker attempting to make distinction between the offensive act and other similar acts which are even less desirable (Benoit 1995, 77). For example, Russian Minister of

Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov argued that he did not mention the removal of the Georgian President as a prerequisite for signing the ceasefire during the telephone discussion with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (press release from 12 August 2008):

Someone misinformed President Bush about our position. This is irresponsible. We are not going to topple anyone; this notion does not exist in our political culture and foreign policy. We know, however, that some other countries are involved in such activities.

A fourth way of reducing offensiveness is the transcendence strategy, when the act is placed in a more favorable context (Benoit 1995, 77). The speaker may even claim that a higher purpose was behind the wrongdoing. Russia was alone in its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence. Its government tried to explain this decision in the following press release from 26 August 2008:

The United States and some European countries already promised President Saakashvili protection from NATO and called for Georgia's re-militarization. This is a direct invitation to a new war. Taking into account the pledges of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian people, the Parliaments and the Presidents of both republics, the opinion of the Russian people and the position of both chambers of our Parliament, the President of the Russian Federation made a decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This decision is based on the UN Statute and the Helsinki Act, as well as other international legislative acts.

Attacking the accuser is another reducing offensiveness strategy, one the Russians used frequently, such as in this press release from 23 August 2008:

Georgia plans new military actions and diversions on South Ossetian soil as well as on the border. Georgian military units are preparing for future clashes. In order to supply its forces in future actions, Georgian military intelligence are building up secret weapon stockpiles, said Colonel General Nogovitsyn.

Finally, compensation is the sixth variation of reducing offensiveness. Here the accused may offer compensation to the victim in hopes it will make up for wrongdoing. Benoit (1995) suggested that this strategy is nothing but a bribe, and "if it has the sufficient value, the negative affect from the desirable act may be outweighed, restoring reputation" (78). This strategy was used primarily to inform the Russian public about compensation for fallen soldiers and civilian South Ossetian victims; for instance, a press release from 5 September 2008 reads:

Amur Oblast workers help the family of a fallen officer. During the fundraiser for South Ossetia, the energy industry workers of Amur Oblast raised 100,000 rubles for the family of an officer killed during the military action in South Ossetia. The monies will be transferred to the widow and daughter of the late Lt. Artem Tsin'ko.

The fourth category in Benoit's theory of image restoration is corrective action, which aims to fix the mess that was made. According to Benoit (1995),

This may take two forms: restoring the situation to the state of affairs before the objectionable action and/or promising to "mend one's ways" and make changes to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act. (79)

In Coombs' (2000) classification, corrective action is the strategy where the speaker assumes a high level of responsibility for the crisis, while stopping short of a full apology, whereas attacking the accuser and denial are the strategies with the lowest level of assumed responsibility for crisis.

Russians applied this strategy to defend themselves against accusations of occupying Georgia as well as to explain to the Russian public why the military suffered unexpectedly heavy losses at the first stage of war and what was being done to fix it, as in this press release from 25 August 2008:

Free access to motorways is restored in Georgia. The roadblocks on the routes leading to South Ossetia have been disbanded, and free access was restored beginning at 10:30PM yesterday, said the Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn.

Mortification is a strategy that requires the speaker to admit wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness (Benoit 1995, 79). Although this strategy has been identified in the literature as the most successful strategy and as vital to image repair efforts (Stephens et al. 2005, Len-Rios and Benoit 2004), the Russian government applied it only once, to confirm the loss of two Russian bombers, which it had previously denied. It is easy to see that mortification, as a sincere apology and acknowledgment in wrongdoing, may cause a legal proceeding. As Hearit (2006)

explained, governments and other institutions do not apologize easily:

Institutional apologists appear to be less likely to offer a quick apology to extricate themselves from a difficult situation; rather, they tend to apologize after the passage of time in which an institution-wide reflection and consensus is able to form, as well as the emergence of a constituency that will allow it (Roman Catholic Church and Jews, women and individuals injured in the spread of gospel). Another factor is that of source...[;] apologia more likely originate from sources other than those who committed the wrongdoing. (202).

None of the Russian ministries ever used the accident strategy in order to avoid responsibility, and apologies were issued only two times; in both cases they were rather meta-textual, as they were not linked to the conflict directly, but rather to the government's earlier erroneous communication about these events. Defeasibility was used rarely (in 4 press releases, or 1.91% of the total), and differentiation was represented by 6 press releases, or 2.87% of the total. Perhaps the Russian government did not use mortification because the acknowledgment of guilt would lead to legal actions, which the Russians wanted to avoid.

Table 2 displays the variation in choice of strategy during the different stages of crisis.

Reducing the offensiveness of the actions was the most popular category of image restoration during all periods of the conflict (the frequency of appearance ranged from 50.46% (Stage

2) to 66.67% (Stage 3)), although during the middle stage corrective action was used almost as often (43.12%).

**Table 2. Frequency Of Image Restoration Strategies By the Stage of Crisis<sup>1</sup>**

Strategy	Stage 1		Stage 2		Stage 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Denial</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>35.23</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>30.28</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>25.00</b>
Simple Denial	13	14.70	13	11.93	1	8.33
Shifting the blame	18	20.45	20	18.35	2	16.67
<b>Evasion of responsibility</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>15.08</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22.02</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8.33</b>
Provocation	15	17.05	10	9.17	1	8.33
Defeasibility	1	1.14	3	2.75	0	0
Good Intentions	3	3.42	11	10.09	0	0
<b>Reducing offensiveness of event</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>54.55</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>50.46</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>66.67</b>
Minimization	6	6.84	8	7.34	0	0
Bolstering	9	10.23	3	2.75	2	16.67
Differentiation	3	3.42	3	2.75	0	0
Transcendence	6	6.84	6	5.50	1	8.33
Attacking accuser	12	13.68	23	21.10	2	16.67
Compensation	12	13.68	11	10.09	3	25.00
<b>Corrective action</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>30.68</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>43.12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16.67</b>
<b>Mortification</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total number of issued press releases, N</b>	<b>88</b>		<b>109</b>		<b>12</b>	

<sup>1</sup> The total sum of frequencies is greater than the number of issued press releases as each unit of analysis might be coded into several strategies.

As the results show, different individual strategies prevailed at different stages of the conflict. For example, denial was used most often at the beginning of the conflict (when 35% of all issued press releases employed this strategy), whereas during the middle stage of the conflict the Russian government emphasized corrective action (43.12% of all press releases issued during this period utilized it). After the ceasefire agreement was signed, compensation gained in popularity. A quarter of all press releases issued during this period offered some sort of financial compensation to the victims of the conflict, primarily to the South Ossetian population, which suffered badly during the conflict.

The final stage of the conflict, or the "conflict transformation", according to the hourglass model, was characterized by a sharp decrease in the number of issued press releases. While 88 and 109 press releases were issued during the first two stages, only 12 press releases, or 5.7% of the total number, appeared in the last two weeks of the observed period.

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamics of each category of image restoration strategy. It is easy to see that the Russian officials relied less on denial during the late stages of the conflict. Denial is a strategy where the communicator assumes low responsibility and can deny accusations without a risk of

being caught, as the early stage of a crisis is characterized by uncertainty (Seeger and Ulmer 2002).

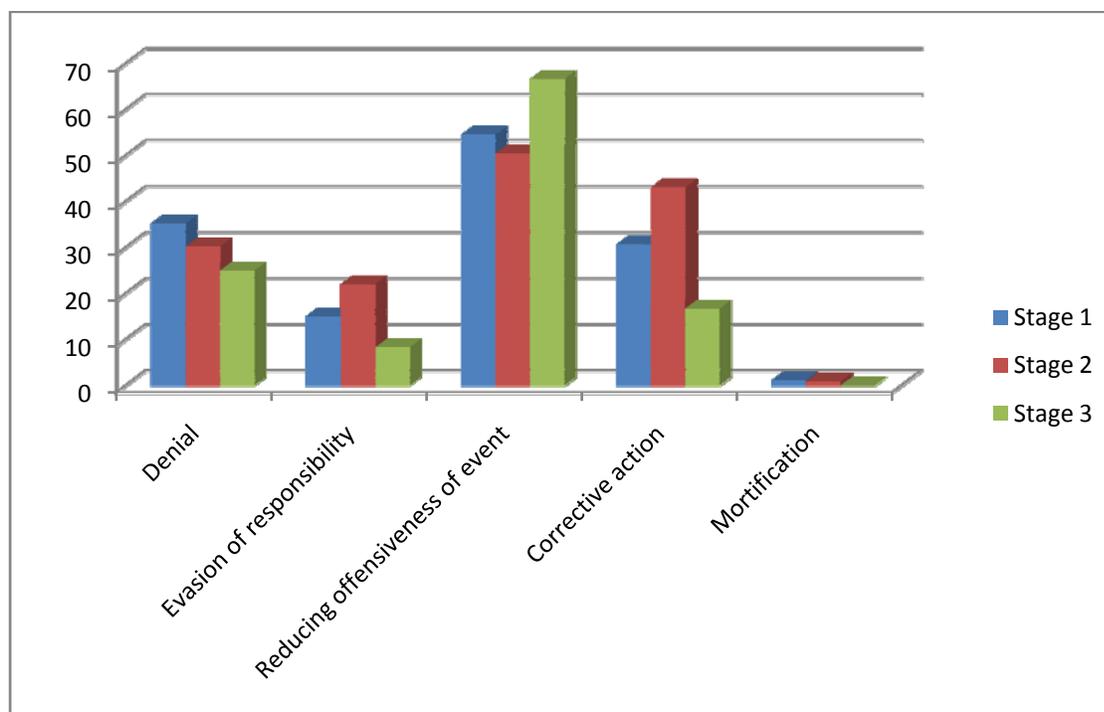


Fig 2. The use of image restoration strategies during different stages of conflict. Data from Table 2.

When it became harder to deny accusations as information about the crisis became more available to media, the Russian government started to employ other strategies. For example, the share of attacking accuser messages grew by half during the middle stage – it appeared in 21.1% of press releases issued at this phase – whereas good intentions were mentioned three times more often than when the conflict began.

It may be conjectured that the Russian government at this point realized the futility of its attempts to persuade West of the Russian version of events. Perhaps it can be explained by the fact that Russia had been rattling the sabers for months before the war in South Ossetia began and that Prime Minister Putin made no secret of his detestation of Mr. Saakashvili (The Economist, 21 August 2008).

When its attempts to justify invasion by denying and shifting the blame failed, the Russian government turned to corrective action instead. Quite often a press release containing information about corrective action (such as withdrawal of Russian troops) also included hawkish messaging which attacked accusers (Georgians, Westerners, or Ukrainians), as in this press release from 21 August 2008:

Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov confirmed that fewer than 500 Russian peacekeepers would be stationed at the checkpoints in South Ossetia. "All other reinforcements sent to South Ossetia earlier, will be withdrawn," said Minister Lavrov. "The peacekeepers will stay in South Ossetia, and the military units involved in the peace enforcement operation would return to the Russian Federation." Lavrov also said, "We started withdrawal a few days ago, but like in a bad detective novel, our Western partners do not want to notice this."

The press releases issued during the third stage of the conflict, which continued from 29 August 2008 to 11 September

2008, were less representative as the Russian troops withdrew from the Georgian territory and the conflict was over.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was run to examine the differences between the preferences in image restoration strategy across three stages of the conflict. An ANOVA was chosen over a t-test because three stages of the conflict were analyzed. According to Stacks (2002), "With the t-test you know any difference must be due to the relationship between the two groups; once you add a third (or fourth or more) group, the relationships are harder to identify" (264). An ANOVA model assumes that "(1) each sample is normally distributed, (2) variances in each group are equal, (3) subjects are randomly selected from the population, and (4) scores are statistically independent" (Wimmer and Dominick 2005, 302).

The ANOVA test revealed statistically significant differences between the choice of image restoration strategy at different stages of the conflict ( $f = 6.32$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.004 < 0.05$ ). Thus, the null hypothesis - that image restoration strategies are distributed equally on all stages of conflict - was rejected.

This study has a number of limitations - for example, its sample size. The study covered only a five-week period and analyzed only 209 press releases.

During this period, the distribution of press releases by the publication date was skewed: 94% of all press releases were issued between 8 August 2008 and 28 August 2008, while only 6% were issued between 29 August 2008 and 11 September 2008. The findings of this research cannot be generalized to other crises, as the conflict in South Ossetia began and ended within weeks, which is not typical for war-related crises.

There are also limitations to the method itself. Wimmer and Dominick (2005) observed that "content analysis alone cannot serve as the basis for making statements about the effects of content on an audience" (153). They warned that the findings of the content analysis are limited by the theoretical model chosen as the basis for the study, as well as by the framework of the definitions and categories.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY

Image restoration theory is still a relatively new theory, and comparatively few studies have examined governmental crisis communication from the perspective of image restoration theory, some of which, namely Zhang and Benoit (2004), and Yang et al. (2008), were discussed in the literature review.

Although in the recent years many quantitative studies have appeared, image restoration theory evolved from subjective research, such as apologia and conflict resolution theories. The goal of the present study, therefore, was to assess crisis communication strategies employed by the Russian government during the war in South Ossetia and to quantify how often different strategies were used. In addition, this study examined

whether the choice of strategy varied during different stages of the conflict.

The strategy the Russian government relied on most heavily was reducing the offensiveness of actions, encountered by the coders in 53.11% of all press releases; this was followed by corrective action, which appeared in 36.36% of all press releases. The most popular subcategories were shifting the blame (employed in 19% of press releases) and attacking accuser (18% of press releases).

The second research question was answered affirmatively: the choice of strategies did vary during different stages of the conflict. The number of press releases including denial or evasion of responsibility gradually decreased throughout the five-week period, while reducing offensiveness became the dominant theme during the last stage of the conflict. Compensation messaging was present in 23% of press releases issued during the third stage of the conflict.

The findings of this study indirectly support Benoit's general stance towards denial strategy. Many studies authored or co-authored by Benoit (Benoit 1995, Len-Rios and Benoit 2004, Zhang and Benoit 2005, Benoit and Brinson 1999b) suggest that the denial strategy must be used selectively and always in combination with other strategies (such as bolstering,

defeasibility, or transcendence). When the Russian government found that denial and provocation strategies did not work, it quickly reshuffled its messaging and came up with another style of messaging, which proved to be slightly more successful. As Hearit (2006) observed, it is extremely difficult to locate responsibility when dealing with organizational and institutional misdeeds. The reputation of Russia was at its lowest after the August crisis, but by November most European Union governments were eager to resume talks on a new peace and co-operation agreement with Russia (negotiations had been put on hold after Russia's incursion into South Ossetia)(The Economist, 6 November 2008). Thus, the strategy of compensation and attacking the accuser proved to be partly successful in rehabilitating Russia's image.

Additional study is needed to assess the content of the Russian government's press releases issued after 12 September 2008 in relation to the war in South Ossetia and to examine the current mix of image restoration strategies being used.

Another area for future research is to determine if denial is the primary image restoration strategy employed by the Russian government during military conflicts. A future study might analyze all press releases issued by the Ministry of Defense

during the wars in Chechnya, for instance, and compare those results to the findings of the present study.

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