

# **Between Performance and Coercion: Political Activism and the State in a Reterritorialized Virtual Community in Georgia**

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## **Abstract**

The research concerned the developments on a Georgian Internet Forum during the War in between Georgia and Russia in 2008. The Internet has been seen as the avenue of deterritorialization, void of territoriality and blowing and the new life into the Habermasian public sphere; present work seeks to prove the opposite. Using the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews, I argue that the Forum in question is deeply connected with social realities of Georgia. Political actors and especially the Georgian State see the Internet as the possibility to reenact and push their agenda.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Virtual Communities, Georgia, Cyberdemocracy

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# 1. Introduction

## *1.1 Communication and the Internet*

The arrival of the Internet as the new sphere of political communication has pushed some theorists (Castells 2001:284; Rheingold [1993] 2000: among many others) to rethink some of the ideas on the nature of human communication. In the age of information, Castells proclaimed, “Network is the message” echoing McLuhan’s famous claim of medium being the message (McLuhan [1964] 2005). The message, I maintain, was stubborn enough to be bounded by either of those concepts. In the present thesis, I will explore the political and social embedding of one online communication space, thus subverting the hypothesis of the new medium being able to transform the nature of human communication.

There has been recent interest in the role of the Internet in democratizing countries. The specifics of the information spread online was seen as subversive by some undemocratic or democratizing states, which pushed them to put large restrictions on the use of the Internet<sup>1</sup>. The rapid spread of Internet access was seen by some as inherently accelerating the process of democratization. The grassroots political activism available on the Internet was picked up by many politicians; others saw the communicatory potential on the Internet as subversive and tried to channel or suppress it in different ways.

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<sup>1</sup> In the most recent report release, Center to Protect Journalists (CPJ), ten worst countries to be a blogger were listed. The top three were taken by Burma, Iran and Syria with China on the 9<sup>th</sup> spot.

The present thesis is the analysis of activities on a Georgian online Forum, *Tbilisi Forumi*<sup>2</sup> during the course of the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 and the months following. *Tbilisi Forumi* was shut down towards the end of the conflict in an apparent attempt to suppress the spread of unwanted information by certain structures of the State. It remained offline until the end of August and reopened in early days of autumn. Details about the developments in those days will be discussed later in the thesis.

In this research, extensive analysis of the developments on *Tbilisi Forumi*, in the second part of 2008 showed that this interactive online locality is deeply connected to “real life” social and political structures. I explore these in two different levels – the embedded character of a virtual community into the social reality and the embedded character and the importance of *Tbilisi Forumi* in the Georgian political life.

There has not been, to the best of my knowledge, any sociological or anthropological study of Georgian Internet, therefore the present research is the first ethnographical account of the political tenets of the Georgian Internet.

## ***1.2. Hypotheses and road map***

In the present thesis, I will work against the paradigm of the Internet as a “free-floating” deterritorialized area that is void of any connections with “real life.” The two hypotheses can be framed as following:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.forum.ge/> *Tbilisi Forumi* will hereafter be referred to as such or “the Forum”.

1. Internet communication is deeply embedded in the political and social realities of the State.
2. Political actors, especially the State see the interactive areas of the Internet as the arena of achievement of their political goals and act in one way or another to accomplish them.

The present research is divided in following manner: in the theoretical framework, I try to look at the theories on virtual communities and the Habermasian theories of public sphere and its applications to the Internet; in this manner, I will try to show how the virtual communities are embedded in the socio-political structures in the given social framework.

In the next chapter, I introduce and contextualize *Tbilisi Forumi* and recent political developments in Georgia; this will help me frame the arguments towards the embedding of the Internet. Next, I will show the “non-virtual” side of the virtual community, looking at the embedding of *Tbilisi Forumi* socially trying to test my first hypothesis. Finally, I will show the embeddedness of the Forum in the political realities of Georgia, starting from the indirect involvement of the State and other non-State actors and moving into the extreme cases of involvement by the coercive structures of the State.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In the present research I will primarily look at the theories on virtual communities on a deep theoretical level as well as the specifics of communication, dynamics of development thereof. The secondary literature to it will be Habermas' theory on the public sphere and the debate stemming from it.

### 2.1 *Virtual communities*

The pioneer of the deeper understanding of the concept of community was German Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. His opposition is between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society, association). The former, as Tönnies argues, is the child of pre-modern era and is characterized by interconnectedness, emotional ties between members. *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, guided by rational principles, individualism, less personal connection between members and individualism, is a product of industrialization, urbanization, and, ultimately, modernity (Tönnies and Harris 2001 [1887]). Tönnies is important as one of the first authors to touch upon the concept of community as such. Moreover, his argument that *Gemeinschaft* is more humane, whilst *Gesellschaft* more mechanistic, rational and void of emotions is, somewhat surprisingly applicable to the studied case.

Breakthrough publication to foreshadow the burgeoning of the online communities was Howard Rheingold's book on virtual communities ([1993] 2000). Back in 1993, the access to Internet was very restricted and centered in technologically developed areas such as the Bay Area in California. The book which can now be described as somewhat idealistic outlook or an account

of what was to become of Internet online communities depicted different tenets of the online communities. Rheingold defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." (p. 5). In the present research, the definition is relevant and I will apply it throughout the research. For Rheingold, virtual communities are a simple continuation of the communities that are formed in "Real Life" (RL), the Internet being the medium transcending barriers of space. For him, it resembles a "neighbourhood pub."

In the voluminous body of scholarship dedicated to online communities, it is possible to dissect two directions in which the literature on online virtual communities and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has developed since: (a) "technological determinist" – the Internet and CMC brings new forms of communication void of territoriality and spatiality thus strengthening the processes of cultural globalization and (b) skeptical – Internet virtual communities are (or will be) clustered and segmented into the different territorial, spatial, linguistic or any other clusters and take form of the "real-life" communities.

One of the cautious advocates of the first view is Manuel Castells (1997; 2001). His slogan – "Network is the message" and the hailing of the subsequent arrival of the Network Society – a society managed primarily in the electronic media, where these are primary means of communication and social interaction. In "The Power of Identity," however, Castells discusses the anti-global order grassroots movements that sometimes emerge on the Internet and their subversive potential. This is relevant to my research since, I argue, *Tbilisi Forumi* is a venue for competing political movements.



Bell (2001) also frames the debate on online communities in terms of globalization, disjuncture, disembeddedness and the general postmodern argument of “lost innocence.” Bell utilizes somewhat forgotten term *Bund* (communion) – “a place for the expression of ferment, of enthusiasm, of unusual doings” (P.107, Quoted in Hetherington, who quotes from Freund). Therefore, Bell claims, the members of an online virtual community are bound emotionally, but eclectically. With the introduction of *Bund*, Bell tries to avoid the “Manichean” dichotomy between cyberspace “reenchanting” or “damaging” real-life communities (Bell 2001:93).

Rheingold retains an in-between stance in this debate – while reconciling with the fact that messianic outlook on virtual communities being able to change the nature of human interaction, he is hopeful that they will open a new front on the public sphere.

## ***2.2. Habermas and the Public Sphere and its applications to the Internet***

Habermas’ outlook on the public sphere is another theoretical underpinning connected to online communication. Internet’s arrival has brought forth a debate on Habermasian public sphere, namely the question of the Internet’s abilities to construct the ideal one perceived by Habermas (1989). Habermas’ idea of public sphere rooted in the western bourgeois society. He deals with public sphere - that is, “characterized by (a) inclusiveness, (b) disregard of status and (c) domain of common concern. At first glance, this sounds very suited for the Internet, especially online Forums where these three criteria are attainable easier than in real-life public

sphere or civil society in general. At first characterized by was As Nancy Fraser (1991) neatly puts it, Habermas' public sphere is

conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and discourses that can in principle be critical of state. The public sphere is also conceptually distinct from the official economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than buying and selling. (p. 110-111)

Later in the same edition, however, Habermas noted that the public sphere is rooted in those conditions of communication, where opinion is produced discursively. He also adds that citizens of a State are supposedly communicating here – to emphasize the importance of a public sphere in democracy. (Habermas 1991:446) Thus, public sphere in Habermas' sense is a domain of communication, exchange free of coercion. Some scholars (Trachtenberg 2006) maintain that virtual communication over Internet in some cases exemplifies the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere.

Can we explore the Internet as a public sphere in Habermasian sense? Theorists have increasingly put a negative answer to such a question. Mark Poster's answer (1997), coming early in the development of the Internet is, though complex, but generally negative as well. It is rooted, however, in the micro level of incompatibility – the capability of the Internet to produce fluid, blurry or multiple identities – therefore, Habermas' requirement of a public sphere being one of embodied subjects is brought under question. While there's a rationale behind this critique, the critique of the Habermasian ideal on the Internet with respect to my case is of a macro character. Thus, the coercive mechanisms of a macro actor such as the State may, in some cases bluntly cut off possibilities of the articulation of counter-hegemonic discourses at large. In some cases it has been argued, it is the possible (Lonkila 2008; Mátya and Kaposi 2008; Warf and Grimes 1997),

but, as in Lonkila's case with anti-military activism on Russian Internet, these are being marginalized, while on larger, more populated spaces on the Internet, State control over the information is, at least theoretically, present. In general, the subversive or "counter-cultural," counter-mainstream movements online have been vastly theorized (Bell 2001; Goggin and McLelland 2008). This, it can be argued, is due to the conceived "nature" of the Computer-Mediated Communication as "liberating," free and rid of the traditional hierarchical narrative structures, comprising of asynchronous, rhizomic, database logic (Manovich 2001). In the present thesis I build upon a different perspective – online communities are deeply embedded in the social and political realities of the given "social" – in my case the unit of analysis is a Georgian state in 2008.

Trachtenberg claims that Russian Internet (Runet), and especially the Russian-language blogs are the domain of the creation, nurturing and recreation of the discourses that are otherwise incompatible with official State discourses, whereas, traditional media are devoid of any discourses that are distanced from the State. While such a function for interactive online communication is crucial, non-democratic or democratizing states such as Russia put effort into suppression of the free exchange of information online. This has been noted in a report centered on influential authoritarian regimes (2009)

In addition to controlling [Internet] access through physical, economic, and technological means, these regimes [in China, Russia and Iran] have enlisted loyal commentators and provocateurs like the "Fifty Cent Party" in China and the "Brigades" in Russia to overwhelm or disrupt undesirable discussions. Furthermore, they use draconian laws to punish outspoken online critics and discourage any who might emulate them (P. 2-3).

Saco (2002), on the other hand, argues that surveillance online does not need to be centralized, as the inherent architecture of the Internet is decentralized. Embedded nature of the Internet was noted by Stuart Sim, who claimed that

anarcho-syndicalism of virtual communities and the ideological sloganizing of the informational libertarians seem, in the long run, doomed to lose in their political naivety. The Internet is not beyond war and capital; rather, their territories and markets have been uploaded into cyberspace (Sim 1998:284).

In the present thesis I will follow Sim's "prophecy." What is surprising, however, is that such claims, at least in the early years of theorizing the Internet have been a minority– majority of theorists maintained the stance opposite to that of Sim's. In the present research, I delineate one "corner" of the cyberspace that is different - the virtual community of Tbilisis Forumi has become deeply embedded in the local socio-political struggles, with different political actors trying to assert their influence. The same line is held by Bohman (2004), according to whom the "the Internet may be embedded in institutions that do not help in transforming its communicative space into a public sphere" (P.135). In my case these institutions are, from a lower to broader level, the internal administration of *Tbilisis Forumi*, non-state actors and the State.

### 3. Introduction to the Case

In the first part of the section, I will briefly introduce the architecture and the peculiarities of the communication on the Forum, the key dynamics of the communication there. In the second part, I will contextualize political situation in Georgia.

#### 3.1 *Tbilisis Forumi*

My research site, as already stated in the introduction, is *Tbilisis Forumi* (Tbilisi Forum) – a Georgian-language online Forum. Internet Forum or a Discussion Board is an interactive website which allows interaction between individuals on a wide range of topics. As most other Internet Forums, *Tbilisis Forumi* has various thematic departments, including politics, sports, music, Jobs and career and computers. My research site is the Department of Politics - the most vibrant, most populous (over 2 million posts in over 39 000 topics made by users from the launch of the Forum in 2001 – more than any other department) and the most influential (this will be explored later in the thesis). *Tbilisis Forumi* is by far the most popular online discussion board, both in terms of politics-related discussions and other topics.

*Tbilisis Forumi* was launched in 2001 as the small society that was usually concerned with talk over Computer-related matters. However, as the owner of the Forum noted in the interview, he was aware and hopeful and was working on the expansion of the Forum. The number of registered members on *Tbilisis Forumi* has been steadily rising ever since – passing the 50,000 limit as of May 2009.

The name *Tbilisi Forumi* never implied the Forum would be only for inhabitants of the Georgian capital at its launch (2001) Georgian Internet was (and still is) heavily centralized in Tbilisi, hence the “*Tbilisi*” component. The language of interaction on *Tbilisi Forumi* is Georgian; otherwise, there are no restrictions to access to *Tbilisi Forumi* from any location.

*Tbilisi Forumi* is a privately owned enterprise. It is important to note that *Tbilisi Forumi* is admittedly a source of income for the owner as it contains banners and thematized paid advertisements<sup>3</sup>. While the information on the amount of income generated by *Tbilisi Forumi* is hard to obtain and wasn’t the purpose of my research, some interviewees noted that the money obtained solely from *Tbilisi Forumi* would be much higher than an average income in Georgia. This however is just speculation – important is that it is in the owner’s interests to keep *Tbilisi Forumi* popular, which will keep the price of advertisements high.

The structure of governance at *Tbilisi Forumi* consists of the aforementioned owner, who is also an administrator, a supermoderator and various moderators in different departments/sections of the Forum. There are different criteria to choose the moderators in different departments. In the department of politics (my research site) there was a practice of electing the moderators. The policy was discontinued and as of 2009 the moderators are appointed directly by the administration. Moderators issue warnings (which increases the period between which users can post again on the forum) and ban some users for repeated offences for an amount of days upon moderator’s discretion. There are no formalized set of rules or a codex according to which moderators act; sometimes, decisions are taken using common sense. The

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<sup>3</sup> During presidential elections in January 2008, an election ad of one of the candidates for presidency was present on the main page of *Tbilisi Forumi*.

administration makes no secret of the fact that there is no democracy on the forum, and explicitly states in the general provisions section of the rules:

*Tbilisis Forumi* is private property of owners, who maintain it by their personal finances. Therefore, there has never been, is not and never will be any democracy, that is, the administration of the Forum directly by its members. This doesn't mean, however, that the owners of the Forum disregard advices of the members – on the contrary, they would encourage new users and their recommendations<sup>4</sup>.

The trick here is that the administration has to maintain popularity of the Forum, which is in direct causal connection with the price of the “banners” (advertisements) on it. Therefore, there have been attempts to “democratize” the Forum – this was the direct election of the moderators and an attempt to create a Senate. The latter case was an attempt to create checks for the “executive branch” – the moderation and administration. It started to work and produce certain “legislation;” the practice of the Senate was shortly was abandoned mainly due to the loss of enthusiasm by the “Senators.” The former – issue with moderation – will be discussed later in the thesis.

The rise on the popularity of *Tbilisis Forumi* was noticed by more conventional media – by now, three of four nationally broadcasting channels – Georgian Public Broadcaster,<sup>5</sup> Rustavi 2 and Mze<sup>6</sup> have covered *Tbilisis Forumi*, interviewing some of the users. A significant cue towards the reinforce the notion of the centrality of *Tbilisis Forumi* in the Georgian cyberspace was the interchangeable usage of *Tbilisis Forumi* and a generic word – Forum.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://forum.ge/rules.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bthb0yvWqkg>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGNa7HuJgdE>

There is conflicting evidence as to whether the owner of the Forum had foreseen such a rise in popularity and influence of the Forum – while he claims that he has, three other interviewees have claimed otherwise. One interviewee used an allegory: “imagine you’re at home with a few of your friends and suddenly 200 guests arrive at once.” Other interviewees noted that the timing of the creation of the Forum – 2001 – coincided with the start opposition movement against Shevardnadze by Mikheil Saakashvili and his allies. This point, however, is weak; without conclusive evidence that these events were related it is more logical to think that this was a mere coincidence. However, one interviewee, a prominent promoter of the popularization of the Internet suggested, Saakashvili and his supporters were keener on using new technologies such as the Internet as opposed to his political foes. This, according to this person, is the reason behind young members of the current government being avid users of Internet.

The main problem with “democracy” on the Forum is about the definition – “if the Forum is considered a property of one person, then how do we speak of the public sphere? Guests behave as they are told to when they go to someone’s house,” some Forum members claim. The opposite

As already noted in the introduction, During the War between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 *Tbilisi Forumi* was shut down. It became active again in September with an altered system of moderation, which will be discussed later.

### ***3.2. The Georgian State***

Georgian national awakening in the early 90s was a painful affair. Shortly before, during and a short while after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Liberation movement in Georgia, led by future president Zviad Gamsakhurdia rose from underground to the foreground of Georgian



politics. As argued by Toft (2002), National Liberation movement, initially created to resist the Soviet Imperialism dwindled down to exclusive nationalistic movement on the edge of chauvinism. While conclusive evidence of ethnic purges is nonexistent, he is widely quoted for a call “Georgia for Georgians”, and most non-Georgian scholars agree that Georgian government led by Gamsakhurdia was a nationalistic one (Jones 1993:, for example).

Within a year, internal unrest in Georgia grew and exploded in a civil war in the winter 1991-1992, when Gamsakhurdia was ousted a paramilitary organizations came to power. Shortly afterwards, Eduard Shevardnadze, former leader of the Communist Party in Georgia came to power. It was in the early 90s that the secessionist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia gained de-facto independence after a war in Abkhazia in 1993-1994. Shevardnadze was in power for a decade. His presidency was characterized by rampant corruption, weak State institutions and general disorganization. It has been described as “weak kleptocracy” (Mitchell 2004:348) or “rather poorly than efficiently governed chaos” (Andronikashvili 2009:35).

In November 2003, Shevardnadze was ousted in a bloodless revolution a young and energetic Mikheil Saakashvili. While some scholars doubt usage of the term “revolution” in the Georgian context (Tudorou 2007), referring to the unchanged class structure, it is evident that the change in the system of governance and the approach was changed. Saakashvili vowed to restore the rule of law, tackle corruption and restore territorial integrity of the country.

I maintain that the crystallization, transformation, and liberalization of Gamsakhurdia’s ideas While direct nationalistic symbolism was involved in some of his gestures, such as the name of his party, “United National Movement,” inauguration speech near the tomb of the 12th

century Georgian king David the Builder in Kutaisi, Eastern Georgia, when he vowed to reunite the country just like David, holding his next inauguration in Sokhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, one of the breakaway provinces (Civil.ge 2004). The gesture was repeated during his second inauguration in 2008. Another direct line could be traced here from Anthony Smith's idea of rediscovering the Golden Age of the nation (Smith 1997), using David the Builder as a role model to unite the nation and return its former glory. Saakashvili's brand of national, as opposed to Gamsakhurdia's, is inclusive; in his speeches, he is eager to speak out his hand towards all the minorities living in Georgia. But this, as I see it, does not undermine the idea behind his sense of defense of national or state interests.

The driving force behind the Georgian "Rose Revolution" was young, Western-educated intellectuals that arguably constituted the civil society of Georgia under Shevardnadze. Paradoxically, Tudoriu claims, while democracy under Shevardnadze was inherently flawed, civil society did exist. However, I argue, significant part of that "caste" took the positions in the government or was in one way or another affiliated with the State, leaving a glowing hole in the civil society which is evident until today.

Another aspect of Saakashvili's rule is the strengthening of the executive power. On the wave of the revolution, popular support for the "revolutionaries" was very high – this was due to drastic unpopularity of Shevardnadze and the charismatic appeal of the young Saakashvili. Therefore, Saakashvili's United National Movement obtained a constitutional majority in 2004 parliamentary elections (which it did again in 2008 elections, gaining 119 of 150 seats in the parliament constitutional majority being 100). Andronikashvili (2009) notes that Saakashvili tried to embody anything that Shevardnadze was not. He also claims that the Georgian state was

preoccupied by “powerfulness,” thus vesting sovereignty in the hands of the executive branch. This, in combination with the stranglehold on the parliament and weak balancing from the judiciary branch of the government has led to centralizing the power in the hands of the executive branch. “Powerfulness”, as stated above, implies return to the glorious past, to “unity.” Such centering on power has led to the arguably disproportionate strengthening of the coercive structures of the State, at the expense of economic development, Andronikashvili claims. On the other hand, constitutional changes that ruling elite has produced, have led, some argue, to the “hyper-presidential” rule (Fairbanks 2004). It can be argued that such changes are necessary in the transitional period; on the other hand they, at least theoretically and temporarily, undermine the principles of democracy and civil society.

Parallel to the reinforcing of the executive branch, the State has been strengthening the hold on media. In the early days of the revolution, it was seen as natural – the main of the opposition TV channel and the main media center of the Rose Revolution, Rustavi 2 was allied with Saakashvili, contributing to the overthrow of Shevardnadze (Mitchell 2004) and transformed into a center of government-supporting media. Later, this was spread to other TV channels and as of 2008, all nationally broadcasting TV stations were seen in one way or another affiliated with the State. Conversely, the TV media that are explicitly pro-opposition are also present; these, however broadcasted only in capital as of 2008.

As noted in the previous subchapter, the young and Western-educated members of the government were more eager to use Internet. It was in 2004 when first direct contact between the members of the Forum and member of the government happened, when then mayor of Tbilisi Zurab Chiaberashvili openly revealed his identity to the users of the Forum and had few meetings

with the users of the Forum, including the owner. This case, however, remains last in such contacts – after Chiaberashvili left mayor’s office in 2005 for representing Georgia in the Council of Europe, no other prominent government official or other political figure has openly revealed his/her identity to the members of the Forum. It was perplexing at first not to do this; *Tbilisi Forumi* has become much more influential after 2005; One interviewee tried to explain the abstinence of politicians from dialogue in a following manner:

### **3.3 Methodology**

In this research, I employed three different types of data collection: analysis of the Forum posts, participant observation on the Forum and series of semi-structured interviews with 16 forum members. Some information was also obtained from communication during informal communication over the Internet (through Instant Messaging) with certain Forum members.

Being a member of the Forum since 2005, I had the experience of tracing the development of the communication in this virtual community. While I have never took part in any of the get-togethers, posted my pictures or did anything to unveil my identity, I could still be regarded as a marginal member of the community. The experience as a Forum member gave me the advantage of deciphering sometimes coded language, local intra-forum slang and “folklore,” which would have been an issue had I been an total outsider.

While I wasn’t very active in the earlier years (2005 to 2007), I became more involved sometime before I pondered researching *Tbilisi Forumi* – both reading it more frequently and

giving more input. In this research, data prior to 2008 is only significant insofar as it is connected with the history of relationship between certain members; however, it is important to have an idea what was going on on the Forum in the earlier days.

The interviews were taken during my stay in Tbilisi in April-May 2009. I interviewed most of the moderation, the owner of the Forum and a handful of members having different political sympathies – those who support or oppose the incumbency. In total, fifteen interviews were done with one person and one was an ad hoc group interview with three moderators. The broad range of questions was similar for all three groups; The topics discussed included the members' personal history on the Forum; the transformations it has seen during their stay there; their involvement and opinion on the Forum during the August 2008 war; their opinion on the closure of the Forum and their sources of information during the period the forum was closed; their opinion of the new type of moderation after the reopening of the Forum; the relationship between the State and the Internet as such; the possibility of State intervention on the Forum; political activism on the Forum; the existence of “elite” members of the Forum.

The interview with the owner of the Forum focused more on the macro structure of the Forum rather than micro, community related aspects, since the owner is not anymore an active member of the Forum. Interviews with the moderating team also included questions related to the fashion of moderation and their incentives during moderation. All interviewees save the owner who was reached via personal networks were contacted via Private Message option on the Forum itself. All members were assured of anonymity, even though some members did not find the mind revealing their identity. Of the initial target group, one member declined the interview, one (moderator) did not answer the message and one offered to fill out a questionnaire. Instead of

these, other members were chosen without the breach of balance. Most of the interviews were conducted in cafes of the interviewee's choice or their workplaces. Three interviews were conducted online over Skype. All interviews were done in Georgian language and were recorded and translated by the author of the present thesis.

The analysis of the archives on the Forum was crucial to reconstruct the war-time posts on the Forum. While all posts are subject to change by the members themselves and the moderation and can be deleted, the re-reading of the Forum posts from August 7 till the closure of the Forum gave a different, cold-headed sense of analysis as opposed to the war-time participant observation on the Forum.

#### 4. Tbilisi Forumi as a pseudo-anonymous community

Early theorists of the Internet Virtual community hailed the arrival of the Internet as the new age of technology, which disturbs the traditional notions of territoriality, spatiality and identity. Later developments and the segmentization of the Internet along linguistic, cultural, or even territorial lines have brought this assertion under scrutiny. The case of *Tbilisi Forumi*, indeed, serves as an example of the pertaining of the “traditional.”

As already asserted, *Tbilisi Forumi* has become a considerable platform for politicians for political action. On a micro level, however, it remains a tightly knit social community – i.e. a platform of expression of the political positions of individuals. While the only restriction of the communication in *Tbilisi Forumi* is linguistic, few other aspects, namely Geography of Georgia (about 1/3 of the population living in the capital, Tbilisi), technological development very much centered in the capital have strengthened the notion of territoriality. The level of interconnectedness of the users (frequent get-togethers, civic activism) has reasserted the notion of identity. It can be stated that active part of the community are aware of each other (this can also be traced by the specific discursive patterns of communication on *Tbilisi Forumi*). Based on the personal experience and a few interviews, it can be asserted that the entry into the very center of the social field of *Tbilisi Forumi* is limited if an individual chooses to be anonymous – at some point, other users tend to become investigative toward the user’s location, social status, occupation, age, gender etc. While, on the one hand, the moderators have the leverage to trace the IPs of users, and, on the other hand, the users themselves can hide their IPs through the usage of proxy servers, this practice is not pertinent. The usual pattern for the entry into the forum is

frequent posting and eventual acquainting with, on the one hand, the most active and socially “rich” users of *Tbilisis Forumi*, and, on the other hand, the moderators (while there is an area of confluence between these two categories, there is still a distinction).

There are different forms of social connection between the users of the *Tbilisis Forumi* that is different from the casual communication (i.e. posting) on the Forum itself. The most straightforward one is the private correspondence between users on the Forum itself.<sup>7</sup> Many users communicate with each other on various different Instant Messaging (IM) services as well. This has become clear both in the interviews and in some of the forum posts, where the users, call on each other to “get on their Skype/MSN” The next stage of the disturbance of the “virtuality” and the rise of the identity is the posting of the pictures of themselves on the specifically designed topic “‘Politics users’ photosession”<sup>8</sup>, which as of May 2009 has about 2900 pictures of the users of *Tbilisis Forumi*.

The main avenue of socialization, however, is frequent get-togethers of *Tbilisis Forumi* users under various circumstances. These can roughly be divided into the leisure activities such as barbecue eating, civic activism - the *Tbilisis Forumi*-based civic organizations “Re:Action” and “Georgian Club”, and more “elite”, loosely government-affiliated users get-togethers with the high ranking government officials to discuss special political implications of both *Tbilisis Forumi* and the general political developments in Georgia.

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<sup>7</sup> *Tbilisis Forumi* engine has a function for regular users to send and receive Private Messages (PMs)

<sup>8</sup> <http://forum.ge/?f=29&showtopic=33666534>



The “offline” activities and the “deanonymization” is the most potent and arguably the only way of gaining prominence on *Tbilisis Forumi* “if you don’t go to these get-togethers or don’t say that ‘I am Davit Davitadze,’<sup>9</sup> not many people will reply to you; you’re nothing.” one of the interviewees noted. The communication on the Forum, while centered on certain political or other topics, contains cues to personal relationship that is obviously related to the offline activities and relationships between Forum members.

The “get-togethers,” as already stated, can be differentiated as well; one of them is the general, friendly leisure meetings between most of the frequent posters on the Forum, but there is also an “elite” group of members, vast majority of them supporters of the current government maintain their “sub-culture” on the Forum – this became evident both in the interviews and in deciphering the cues during their conversations on *Tbilisis Forumi* itself.

Civic activism triggered a dramatic rise of the popularity of *Tbilisis Forumi*. As one interviewee noted, *Tbilisis Forumi* became much more popular in 2003, when one Forum member decided to do a protest rally in front of the Russian Embassy. This led to both rise of popularity of the *Tbilisis Forumi* and the significance thereof in the Georgian political and civic scene. As noted above, conventional media covered the rallies set up by the members of *Tbilisis Forumi*. Interestingly, the topic of these rallies were at all times “pro-Georgian” – usually anti-Russian or trying to help the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the conflict areas. These different forms of civic activism have continued and, in 2008, two *Tbilisis Forumi*-based Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were formed. According to some users, at least one of these is indirectly financed by the State officials:

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<sup>9</sup> name is fictional

Very often, when there were material problems, there were always some financial problems [during protest actions initiated by *Tbilisi Forumi* members in front of the Russian Embassy]. Then there formed a certain organization in one Theatre, where certain members of civil society got together. There were two Forum members with them, and via one of them, there was established a contact with Giorgi Giorgadze<sup>10</sup> [an influential MP], and with one phone call all financial problems were solved, which were unsolved for ten days. [...] Later, members of Junta [Moderators], at least some of them, were in constant contact with these government members.

It is legitimate to ask how is it possible to exert any influence if revealing the identity is a must on the Forum. The usual practice for certain politicians is to reveal their identity to a certain group of users without writing to publicly on the Forum, which can be read by anyone who reads Georgian. Sometimes, however, curious incidents happen when certain politicians are tracked down by some users, which were the case with one of the leaders of the Republican party, Revaz Revazishvili<sup>11</sup>. Later on, he admitted this in publicly in one of the TV shows, stating that he quit posting of the Forum because his anonymity was disturbed. Certain members try to decipher different politicians behind certain nicknames. While this is rarely successful, it is another argument toward the reterritorialization and the embedded character of the Forum, where all prominent actors want to know who other actors are.

While there was no research done on the social composition or demographics of *Tbilisi Forumi*, it is evident that the core group of the frequent posters on it is middle-class predominantly male population of young adults in their 30s. This is somewhat different from the usual perception of the Internet being the venue of the discussion for tech-savvy youth, but can be

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<sup>10</sup> The name, as well as names of other high-ranking officials mentioned in the present thesis is fictional. Any coincidence with real people is accidental.

<sup>11</sup> Name is fictional

explained by the widespread access to Internet for at workplaces; I would argue that this is how many members of the forum do.

While the relationship between *Tbilisi Forumi* and the State will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis, it is sufficient to say at this point that the virtual community of *Tbilisi Forumi* is deeply embedded in social and political structures of the Georgian society, which is another argument towards the reterritorialization of the Internet as a public sphere and as a platform of certain social and political actors for their purposes.

## **5. *Tbilisi Forumi* and political activism: the State and other political actors**

After 2003, the political department of Tbilisi Forumi, I would argue, has gained certain political power. While primary function of the board was interaction between spatially split users, it has also become a venue for civic activism, and, after the rise in reach, has become interesting for certain political organizations for certain methods of probe into or influence the public opinion, propaganda and, at extreme, direct coercion. Both the State and non-state actors antagonistic to State attempt this; I split such efforts into two subsets – direct and indirect political actions.

### **5.1. *Indirect Involvement – The State and other Political Factions***

According to Bohlman, in a communication situation in the public sphere, “speakers offer reasons to each other and expect that others will consider their reasons or concerns [...], without anyone exerting control over it or having special status” (Bohman 2004). Is that the case with *Tbilisi Forumi*. My answer to this is a though cautious but a definitely negative. The research showed, on the one hand, a number of attempts to try to exert pressure on certain users to post specific information for attaining certain political goals and on the other hand, saw many people having different statuses.

It is interesting to note that the members of the government claim not to be looking at the Forum “seriously” or downplaying its prominence. One interviewee noted that the members of

the government anonymously present on the Forum claim that they don't consider it "anything serious" or capable of influence. Another interviewee noted that

it is hard to find a country where forum is so influential. I can tell as a former employee of Rustavi 2 [the most prominent TV Station in Georgia] that the morning there begins with reading the Forum. I can tell you, as one of the moderators told me, the Forum owner was contacted by some people and was told that "business is good but you must be aware of certain things." After this, certain information subversive to the coercive structures of the State was erased.

While such claims are not independently verifiable, the prominence of the Forum as the venue for political struggles is apparent. I argue that this is the product of the lack of public sphere or a space for discussions in the media, which is lopsided in different, pro-governmental or pro-opposition directions, leading to vacuum. It is here when the State and other actors try to promote their ideas. Some cases of such "soft" influence are discernible and became apparent during interviews. As one interviewee claimed,

I recall once I was furious about actions of the Prosecutor's office and I wrote about it openly [on the Forum], and one member wrote me a private message, and he/she<sup>12</sup> told me: "please don't write these things about the Prosecutor because his morning starts from the reading Forum, and he likes to read your posts, and please don't write these thing about him, this person warned me nicely. Then, to assure me of his words – I didn't believe him/her first but then he invited me to his office and I went there and was convinced that this person was working there. So they [high-ranking officials] do read the Forum.

The above quote from one of the interviews is indicative. Such actions are in direct contradiction with Habermasian ideal of a public sphere and support the claim of the embedded character of the inherent interactive communicatory sphere.

There is overwhelming evidence that political parties use *Tbilisi Forumi* as a platform for political activism. As already noted in the earlier chapters, the political importance of *Tbilisi*

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<sup>12</sup> The interviews were conducted in Georgian; in Georgian language third person singular pronoun is not gender-specific.

*Forumi* has been on the rise; Some interviewees recalled the messages they received as some people tried to hinder with their freedom of communication. In these interviews, the hindrance usually came from the State:

Activists of the National Party, serious politicians, noticed that my word for a part of the Forum is influential. [...] They would suggest - “open this topic and it will work, or would you mind writing this and that.” Maybe I’m not the person you need to talk to, since I will never act by instructions, will not post what I don’t think. [...] I have been instructed to post something that sounds nice from me, since I rarely say something nice and if I do this becomes influential. [...] But I will never write something I don’t believe in.

This kind of “soft” involvement trying to manipulate public opinion is present; however, sometimes different type of manipulation happens, and sometimes leads to comical incidents told by one of the interviewees, when a verbal argument between two users of the forum had transformed into a direct confrontation between a regular user and, as it later became clear, a certain MP from the ruling party.

The involvement of the owner in such soft instances is unclear; the owner himself vehemently denies any connection with any government structures. The popular opinion of the interviewees is well summed up by a following quote:

The State is very active, because they know it is populous, they know it is influential, they use it for probe of opinion. I can’t say for sure, because that would be an accusation, but it would be classical if it was like that. [...] I don’t doubt that he [the owner] would be contacted a few times by [people of] the Interior Minister and be asked: on which side are you?

While there is no direct evidence apparent from the interviews of the *non-State actors* contacting certain members fishing for something, most interviewees agree that the Republican Party of Georgia (one of the parties in the opposition) is very active in promoting their case. Some members of the Forum are openly claiming that they are members of this party; the

involvement of the Republicans is also evident in the polls that are made on the Forum where this party usually gets very high ranking disproportionate of its results in the general election.

### 5.1.1 Moderation Post-War: *the Junta*

At the end of the direct military confrontation, the aggression was concentrated and channeled directly towards Russia and Russians. Calls were made to get rid of everything Russian. This is still indirectly supported by the government – Russian news TV channels are still unavailable as of May 2009 for the majority of the population. On the other hand, full support for President Mikheil Saakashvili that was evident during the war has disappeared and the users are now split on their support for the president. A considerable amount of posters after the war on *Tbilisis Forumi*, most of them supporters of the current government still claim the war had long-term benefits for Georgia as it further weakened Russia. Even forecasts that by 2013, “Georgia will destroy Russia, go to Psou [a river on the administrative border between Abkhazia and Russia] and further, becoming a small regional superpower surrounded by buffer vassal states,<sup>13</sup>” were present. While during the war, belligerent discourses were at the center of the forum’s attention, after the war, many people started to speak up against it. Later in the paper, I will discuss in more detail the specific forms that have emerged in *Tbilisis Forumi* during and after the war. At the time, *Tbilisis Forumi* was shut down apparently by coercive structures of the State in the evening of August 11.

After the war finished and the Forum was reopened, a peculiar type of a self-proclaimed *junta* of moderators started to rule there – this was a group of eight moderators enforcing the

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<sup>13</sup> <http://forum.ge/?showtopic=33907836&view=findpost&p=12103944>

rules, which on paper were a stricter version of general rules of the Forum – i.e., (a) no information on the location of the Georgian troops; (b) no unsourced information in general; (c) no open calls to overthrow the government; (d) mentioning South Ossetia, which Georgian government considers a flawed, artificial term, was prohibited. Instead, usage of “so-called South Ossetia,” “South Ossetia”, “Tskhinvali Region,” or “Samachablo” (old Georgian name of the territory) was not prohibited, with the latter hailing encouraged.

Sometimes State and TV Stations refers to it [separatist region] as South Ossetia. We tried to discourage the use of the flawed term, people shouldn't be indoctrinated that this is not our territory. So we said that “right” terms must be use, and whoever doesn't is warned. In this way, we tried to manipulate the common perception and I think we succeeded,

one moderator claimed. With the Russian sources, justification was that misinformation from Russian State-controlled propaganda should not indoctrinate the Georgians. At least one part of the moderators this was natural. “Now if you put some terrible information from Russian website, people won't believe it. I think it was the consequence of our forceful actions before [in early *Junta* days],” one moderator said.

In practice, however, users were warned or banned only for the calls against Georgian government, while derogatory statements against Russia, South Ossetia or Abkhazia were implicitly encouraged, which was in direct contradiction with one of the internal rules of *Tbilisis Forumi*: “[it is forbidden to post something that] hinders national pride, i.e. articulations of discriminative character against certain ethnicity/nation in an unacceptable form. This concerns usage of unacceptable or derogatory epithets towards some nation.” This rule was never enforced. No “unsourced information” in practice meant no Russian sources as many of these sources were considered Russian propaganda and were usually deleted by the *Junta*. One of the moderators,



first deputy minister at a Georgian ministry<sup>14</sup>, when asked if the *Junta* hindered free exchange of information on *Tbilis Forumi*, explained:

There are different kinds of information. One is objective type of information, another is information which is designed by a certain group serves a special purpose– to or structure to bring panic, disorder, or direct public opinion, and this is at odds with the State interests, moreover if this comes from Russia. It is natural, when we, some part of the users which consider the Forum seriously [...], it is natural; I do not rule out that that this information interests not only Georgian State structures but others [Russians].

*Junta* was renamed in two weeks to “Tsiteli Khmerebi” (“The Khmer Rouge”), alluding to communist ruling party in 1970s Cambodia, subsequently to Falange Espanola (referring to pro-fascist organizations in 1930s Spain). Finally, the moderators became “regular” ones, sporting the picture of Georgian Interior Minister Ivane Merabishvili as their user picture. Members of *Junta* considered at least part of this new order humorously. The chronology of the reopening of the *Tbilis Forumi*, according to one of the moderators, was as such:

A few people, active posters of the Forum got together and we wanted the Forum to reopen, we contacted the forum owner and talked to him assured him that in case we became moderators, they would support that Forum was reopened and that no information was spread that put State Interests in jeopardy. The rest, *Junta* and everything else was kitsch, a game. [...] Me and my friends, as opposed to many other users, do not consider the Forum so seriously. We consider it as seriously, as it deserves to be considered.

The rise to power of *Junta* led to a small-scale “authoritarianism” on the Forum. It was promoting the Georgian message on the war. The tactic of achieving these was, as it was at first coercive – the Russian or any other alternative discourses were simply suppressed/closed/deleted from the Forum. Later on, however, the game became subtler – such “alternative” discourses critical of the State were marginalized, demonized and suppressed with the help of irony and constant mocking of the Russian propagandist machine by the moderators and other users with high symbolic capital, i.e. those were listened to. One of such examples was the mocking of the

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<sup>14</sup> This is a ministry that is not directly concerned with coercive action

Russian idea that Georgians “Bombed Sleeping town of Tskhinvali” at night on August 7-8. The forum folklore transformed the propagandist phrase into the mockingly vulgar, in a sense chauvinist “Fuck your Sleeping Tskhinvali!” mantra, which was repeated on a regular basis for months by select users of the Forum. Such a formula proved efficient; not only were the blatant Russian narratives of the war suppressed, but also mixed narratives or acknowledging the mutual responsibility for the war were gone.

*Junta* consisted of four employees of the aforementioned ministry; other four members to the best of the knowledge of the author were not directly affiliated with the State. While there is no direct evidence as to whether these people are acting “under orders” on the Forum, it is evident (and natural) that they do not nurture or maintain discourses critical of the State; on the contrary, the all *Junta* members were seen, some of them admittedly, as the supporters of the current government. There is not enough data to claim that the members of *Junta* were controlled or in direct connection with the members of the coercive structures of the State; moreover, all members of the *Junta*, albeit understandably, strongly deny this. It is sufficient, however, that irrespective of whether *Junta* members were in direct cooperation with any other officials; they indirectly or directly promote the government message.

“Kitsch” remark – that of the *Junta* being a mere performative form of the otherwise regular moderation and the rhetoric surrounding it was carried through by the most members of the *Junta* during the interviews. However, one non-ministry affiliated moderator remarked: “we played the State-game, but it had concrete results. It was the same Moderation but with stricter rules, as if we came there and yelled ‘Stop!’”

The free exchange of information as sketched out by Habermas was indeed under scrutiny. Most interviewees critical of the current government acknowledged the suppression of “alternative” information by the *Junta*. What is more, some members of the *Junta* did, as well:

Practically, we are at war even now. If we say that the current government actions are considered serving State interests, in this case yes, Junta was serving State interests. If we say that Misha [president Saakashvili] started the war, and so on, then yes, we did suppressed that kind of information, because that is misinformation. In this case, free-flow of information was suppressed. If different versions come from Russian website, we will block it, of course, because this is propaganda.

In this case, *Tbilisi Forumi* witnessed direct coercion and the manipulation of public opinion internally by the members of higher authority, the *Junta*. It is irrelevant here to discuss how justified such an incursion was; what is important is that such attempts were admittedly taken. On the other hand, members of the *Junta* are affiliated with the government therefore State interests were promoted and subversive action discouraged. Such an approach in the Georgian context – phrases of president Saakashvili saying that “we are all one, it is not about the government, but it is about the people” leads to the absolutist perception of sovereignty, when the people exist for the government, not the opposite (Andronikashvili 2009). What is curious that such discourses coincided with ones promoted by the *Junta*. We can conclude hereby that the Habermasian free exchange of information in the post-war period on *Tbilisi Forumi* was not present.

## **5.2. Direct Involvement**

The most overt case of direct interference into the work of the Forum was during the Russian Georgian War in August 2008.

The breakaway republic of South Ossetia tried to secede from Georgia in 1991 and achieved de-facto independence back then. After 2003, when new Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, efforts to reintegrate the region into Georgia had been underway. On the other hand, de-facto South Ossetian leadership was heavily supported, militarily, financially, politically or economically by the Russian Federation. On August 7, in response to numerous South Ossetian “provocations”, Georgia declared a restoration of “constitutional order” in the region, which marked a beginning of a full-scale war. Russian Federation deployed a huge number of additional troops into the region and also bombed many Georgian towns, including the capital Tbilisi. By August 10, Georgian forces had to withdraw from their positions. Russian forces moved deep into Georgian territory, occupying few Georgian cities. Ceasefire, brokered by France-led EU delegation, was declared August 12 and signed by Georgian and Russian Presidents on August 16. Gradually, Moscow loosened its hold over the cities in Georgia proper, but strengthened their presence in the breakaway republic of South Ossetia, and other breakaway republic – Abkhazia, pondering the erection of military bases and strengthening control on the administrative border with Georgia. Russia also recognized the independence of those states, which they had been reluctant to do for the last 15 years.

Some time before the start of the direct military confrontation, the pro-war attitudes on Tbilisis Forumi have burgeoned. The main trend that can be noticed right away is straightforward. Starting August 7, Tbilisis Forumi started to resemble an office for soldier recruitment. General mood in the relevant topics of the forum could be described as “I hope I am drafted.” It was rather hard to see the posts skeptical of Georgian advances in South Ossetia as most of these were demonized and usually wiped out. As one interviewee put it, “first few days during the war the Forum was united as never before. But few days after, serious disagreements

emerged. It was then when these [state-controlled] users started to act. Then the Forum was shut down.”

It is interesting that both the users sympathetic to State and those critical of it recall the days of August on the Forum filled with “brigades.” These are a group of users, acting upon orders from someone to spread a certain opinion. Some claim that the Special Forces had some people employed to propel public opinion on the Forum during the war. “First, lots of new nicknames arrived with very few posts. Then, there was posting of different people from one and the same nickname – it seems like they were taking turns – I am sure of that. Then, some topics just disappeared... there was lots of evidence,” one user critical of the State’s actions noted. Somewhat curiously, carbon copy vocabulary, albeit with a different hue was seen from the users sympathetic of the government – the State-supporting users/moderators insinuated these were acting upon orders from Russia to spread panic. It is all but impossible for an observer to obtain conclusive evidence as to whether these did exist or not; however, similarities between “Runet” and *Tbilisi Forumi* became more apparent in those days.

In the earlier stages, when the Russian presence was not so evident, frequent bad-mouthing of the separatist Ossetian authorities and sometimes people in general were common; One user pondered the possibility of rolling in the “second echelon – the bulldozers,” possibly to destroy parts of the South Ossetian cities (ironically, though sadly, this is what happened to the Georgian villages in South Ossetia after the conflict was over). Later, when Russian military rolled in, most of the aggressive rhetoric was directed towards Russia and Russians.

There is conflicting evidence as to whether Forum owner was informed about the shut-down of *Tbilisi Forumi*, but it is generally accepted, both according to the interviews and the

materials posted on *Tbilisi Forumi* that the shut-down was initiated and authorized by the State, on the basis of the spread of unwanted information in times of war which contradicted the State interests (this is in accordance with Georgian constitution which states that freedom of speech “can be restricted by law and by the conditions necessary in a democratic society for the guarantee of state and public security, territorial integrity.” (Article 24/4)). Freedom House report, however, noted that “The decision to filter and censor [Tbilisi Forumi] was taken by the executive branch alone and lacked judicial oversight and other procedures that would have enabled public input or transparency. There was no clear legal basis for the action.” It is interesting that the situation on *Tbilisi Forumi* during the war was compared by few interviewees with that of November 7, 2007 when the crackdown on the demonstration in the center of Tbilisi happened, with subsequent raid of the opposition-minded TV channel later during the day. “We were expecting that it would be shut-down during back then, too. If you noticed, some people were expecting a shut-down during April [when a new wave of demonstrations happened],” one interviewee noted.

It is beyond the scope of this research to investigate the legality of the closure; anthropological implication of this, I would argue is that informal structures within the Internet have finally found their way out into the society and *Tbilisi Forumi* became one of the central sources of information during the times when the information on the specific developments during the war was scarce and came from the official channels, whereas information on *Tbilisi Forumi* usually came from the informal social networks of the users – phone calls or text messages from the conflict area or otherwise. This was indirectly proven by one of the added rules after reopening of *Tbilisi Forumi*, which stated:

You are aware of the fact that on during the war Georgian-Russian war, the situation on our Forum became very tense. The cases of spread of misinformation and panic were evident. [...] It is categorically forbidden to post any information on the location of Georgian troops [...], any efforts to spread panic<sup>15</sup>.

While most interviewees agree that during the war, *Tbilisi Forumi* was a goldmine for the access to “alternative” information, the opinion of users is split when confronted a question as to whether *Tbilisi Forumi* had played a positive or a negative role during the war. Such “alternative” “discourses that in principle can be critical of State” (Fraser 1991) were simply cut off; this refutes the idea of the Internet being able to reenact public sphere in times of crises.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://forum.ge/?act=Print&client=printer&f=29&t=33881010>

## 6. Conclusion

*Tbilisis Forumi* is a unique phenomenon of an interactive Internet space which is central to political life in Georgian State. This was, at least in part, due to the possibility of the creation of “alternative” discourses, spread of information that was not available in other media after 2003 Rose Revolution. The rise of the influence of *Tbilisis Forumi* was, I argue, one of the by-products of the absence of a medium of free communication. However, such rise in prominence and influence has led different political actors to “take up arms” and act in this locality to gain some political power. The State, as well as other political actors has tried to channel *Tbilisis Forumi* into a space where discourses suitable for them were nurtured, while others suppressed. After the War in August 2008, and the change in the moderating team, discourses of the State and the Moderation have coincided.

The research undertaken has shown that The Internet is not as dissociated from the social and political realities as it was sometimes theorized – moreover, in Georgian case it is another medium, another venue for the, on the one hand, communication otherwise possible and existent on the “offline” level and on the other hand a venue for political activism.

The bluntly put question whether *Tbilisis Forumi* controlled by the State is not answerable in black and white terms. While there is no evidence that coercive structures of the State are in direct control with the Forum authorities, there was one direct case of the shut-off of the Forum and evidence, both from the State and the non-state actors of attempts of probing the public opinion, altering the public opinion, and propaganda: all of these fall in the category of indirect control. The two hypotheses mentioned in the introduction, however, are upheld – *Tbilisis Forumi* is indeed deeply rooted in the political realities of Georgia and on the other hand,



virtual community of *Tbilisi Forumi* is looked at as potentially usable to propel their interests by various political actors.

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