Introduction

This chapter examines the findings of three well-known Russian commentators who take exception to the Medvedev–Putin regime’s official view on the question of which side initiated hostilities at the time of the five-day Russo-Georgian War of August 2008. The three commentators are: Andrei Illarionov, who served as President Putin’s senior economic adviser in the Russian presidential administration during the period 2000–05; Pavel Felgenhauer, a leading military affairs journalist who writes for the thrice-weekly pro-democracy newspaper Novaya gazeta; and Yuliya Latynina, another influential journalist who regularly publishes in Novaya gazeta, on the websites ej.ru and Gazeta.ru, and who also hosts a popular weekly radio programme on Ekho Moskvy Radio.1

On 24 June 2010, President Dmitri Medvedev, during a joint press conference with President Obama held in the East Room of the White House, stipulated that the 2008 war was a ‘conflict that was initiated by Georgia’s leadership’ (Calmes, 2010). As we shall see, Illarionov, Felgenhauer and Latynina contest this assertion by the Russian president. In addition to examining the views of the above-mentioned three commentators, this chapter also seeks to compare what they write concerning the outbreak of hostilities with the findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFFMCG) of the Council of the European Union. That body, whose head of mission was Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini of Switzerland, made its lengthy report concerning the conflict public on 30 September 2009 (Council of the European Union, 2009).2
Illarionov’s findings

By far the most significant contribution to an understanding of the root causes of the August war (on the Russian side) has been the prodigious research effort put in by Andrei Illarionov. In the future no one will be able to write in an informed fashion about the war without first assimilating the huge amount of material that Illarionov has posted on the Internet. Of particular value are the highly detailed chronology and collection of documentary and analytical materials that Illarionov posted in 2009 on the site of the publication *Russkii zhurnal* (Illarionov, 2009f). Illarionov has also attempted to boil down and synthesise the information posted on the site of *Russkii zhurnal* in a lengthy four-part article appearing in *Novaya gazeta* in late June and at the beginning of July 2009 (Illarionov, 2009e). An English-language version of this essay, together with a detailed chronology of events, appeared in Illarionov’s contribution to the 2009 collection *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*, edited by Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Illarionov, 2009h). In addition to these publications, Illarionov on 20 February 2009 posted a useful chronology of actions taken by both the Russian and Georgian sides in the period leading up to the conflict on the site livejournal.com (Illarionov, 2009c). To take one example, he reported that Russia first placed tanks on the territory of South Ossetia on 3 February 2003, while Georgia first did so on 7 August 2008. In addition, Illarionov gave several lengthy interviews to Ekho Moskvy Radio, in which he further documented his version of events (Illarionov, 2009a, 2009d and 2009f). He also granted an interview to Radio Liberty on the same topic (Illarionov, 2009b). It is worth noting that the long Tagliavini report fails to acknowledge in any way Illarionov’s ground-breaking research. While the report does footnote two other articles appearing in the compendium edited by Cornell and Starr, it passes in silence over Illarionov’s seminal contribution to the volume.

This chapter will first summarise Illarionov’s chronology and his documentation of the build-up on the Russian side in preparation for the August war. Then it will examine his description of the immediate run-up to the war, beginning in late July of 2008. In Illarionov’s view, the antecedents to the August war stretch back as far as 1999, when Vladimir Putin became prime minister of Russia. From 1999 onwards, Illarionov asserted, there developed a pattern of constant, unrelenting aggression on the part of Russia against its southern neighbour. First, he