

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2037
August 28, 2008

Russia's Recognition of Independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia Is Illegitimate: They Are Not Kosovo

Sally McNamara

Russia has signaled its intention to continue escalating the crisis in Georgia by unilaterally and illegally recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

After both failing to abide by the terms of the formal ceasefire negotiated by French President Nicholas Sarkozy and vetoing attempts to resolve the crisis in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said he “now felt obliged to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as other countries had done with Kosovo.”¹

Comparing the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia with Kosovo is not only duplicitous, but it is also a calculated move by Moscow designed to show the West that it was serious when it threatened reprisals for Kosovo's declaration of independence in February.² Russia successfully engineered this crisis to suit its broader geopolitical ambitions, and unless the West pushes back in unequivocal terms, it is more than likely that Russia will pursue similar policies in other neighboring states, particularly Ukraine.

Russia Does Not Keep Its Word. After more than a week of disproportionate military activity by Moscow, including multiple incursions into sovereign Georgian territory, Russia signed a French-led ceasefire agreement on August 16, agreeing to six key points. Moscow has shamelessly flouted the ceasefire at every turn, thereby exposing the weak-

ness of Sarkozy's shuttle diplomacy. However, despite the ceasefire's general shortcomings, the agreement was clear on one particular point: both sides' commitment to international talks regarding the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.³ Emboldened by the fact that Russia previously endorsed United Nations (U.N.) resolutions affirming the territorial integrity of fellow U.N. member state Georgia, Sarkozy took Moscow's word that the final status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be resolved through international negotiations.

Although Europe has shown itself to be weak and ineffective in resolving this crisis, it has been unified around the idea that Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected. Moscow's illegal and immoral recognition of the break-away regions is both a personal humiliation for Sarkozy and a political humiliation for the European Union's (EU) policy of unfettered engagement with Russia.

Russia's Illegal Actions. Through its recognition of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia is attempting to set as precedent the redrawing of borders by the use of force. This move has

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2037.cfm

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

been condemned by Germany, France, the U.K., NATO, the Council of Europe, the United States, and Russia's neighbor Ukraine. Representatives of these nations and organizations have issued strong statements of condemnation, including the following:

- British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has denounced Moscow's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as "unjustifiable and unacceptable";⁴
- Georgia's deputy foreign minister, Giga Bokeria, has described Russia's decision as "an uncooled annexation";⁵ and
- U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stated that the U.S. will veto any attempt to legitimize Russia's actions through the UNSC.⁶

At present, UNSC resolutions recognizing the Georgian borders inclusive of South Ossetia and Abkhazia—resolutions of which Russia has previously voted in favor—remain in force.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia Are Not Kosovo.

The current situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia bears no resemblance or moral equivalence to Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008. Kosovo spent seven years as a U.N.-administered protectorate and was denied Security Council recognition only when Moscow wielded its veto power. U.N. Special Envoy on Kosovo's future status Martti Ahtisaari, who proposed Kosovan independence, enjoyed the support of the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, the United States, the Western Members of the Kosovo Contact Group, the U.N., and U.N. Secretary-General Ban

Ki-moon. Ahtisaari united the majority of the international community on Kosovo's future, and thus far 46 U.N. countries have formally recognized Kosovo, with seven recognitions still pending.⁷ The near-universal support for Kosovar independence stands in sharp contrast to the unilateralism exercised by Moscow over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Kosovo's independence was gained through the U.N. process with prior consultation and widespread unity.

The head of OSCE, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, has accused Russia "of trying to empty South Ossetia of Georgians."⁸ As a result of either force, fear or a combination of both, thousands of Georgians have fled the region. South Ossetia, with Moscow's assistance, is cleansing the area of ethnic Georgians, thereby essentially copying Serbia's effort to ethnically cleanse Kosovo. The West should not countenance such a policy.

Russian claims that Georgia has engaged in Serbian-like ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia are preposterous. The systematic and brutal atrocities committed by a Slobodan Milošević-led Serbia in the Balkans are incomparable to the situation between Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. When the majority of the European Union and the United States recognized Kosovo's independence, they acknowledged that such independence was the result of tough, tragic, violent, and unique circumstances. As Lady Margaret Thatcher said in 1999, "It would be both cruel and stupid to expect the Albanian Kosovans now to return to live under any form of Serbian rule."⁹ Apart from Moscow, even the most ardent critic of Georgian President Mikheil

1. "Russia Recognizes Georgian Rebels," BBC News, August 26, 2008, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/7582181.stm (August 28, 2008).
2. "West 'to Pay for Kosovo,'" *The Sunday Mail* (Australia), February 24, 2008.
3. "Russia Signs up to Georgia truce," BBC News, August 16, 2008 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7564776.stm> (August 28, 2008).
4. "UK urges Russia to 'abide by law,'" BBC News, August 26, 2008, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7582509.stm (August 28, 2008).
5. "West condemns Russia over Georgia," BBC News, August 26, 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7583164.stm> (August 28, 2008).
6. "Russia Recognizes Georgian Rebels," BBC News.
7. "Who Recognized Kosovo as an Independent State?" at <http://www.kosovothankyou.com> (August 28, 2008).
8. "Russia Recognizes Georgian Rebels," BBC News.

Saakashvili would be at pains to compare him to Slobodan Milošević.

Unlike Kosovo, which wants to enjoy true independence and ingratiate itself into Euro–Atlantic institutions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia will become enclaves of Russia, de facto subservient to the will of Moscow. Indeed, Moscow is currently considering basing a permanent military facility in Abkhazia.¹⁰ Russia argued that the principle of self-determination was null and void in Kosovo but has now turned around and used it as an excuse to back South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence, which it ultimately has no intentions of respecting. Moscow remains intellectually bereft in this argument, lacking any sort of consistency with regard to the principle of self-determination.

In Defense of Our Values. Ukraine's president Victor Yushchenko is correct in stating that the Georgian–Russian War has exposed the weakness and ineffectiveness of international bodies like the U.N.¹¹ Russia has shown itself more than ready to have a showdown with the West and is blatantly testing the resolve of both Europe and the United States.

Europe must quickly recognize that the Georgian situation cannot be undone and that more aggres-

sion is to be expected from Moscow. Russia has pledged that it will go to any lengths to protect its gains in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the West must not underestimate Moscow's determination to make good on that commitment.

In a stirring article in the *Daily Telegraph*, British Conservative leader David Cameron and Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek stated that “we should not forget that the lessons of 1968 apply still in 2008—that we must be strong and vigilant in defence of our values and not look the other way when a small independent country is invaded by its neighbour.”¹² Vice President Dick Cheney will visit Georgia next week, following an emergency EU summit to discuss the Caucasus crisis. It is important that Europe stands with the United States in confronting Russian aggression.

—Sally McNamara is Senior Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation. The author is grateful to Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D., Vice President, Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation, for his advice and suggestions.

9. Margaret Thatcher, “Speech to the International Free Enterprise dinner,” April 20, 1999, at www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=108381 (August 28, 2008).

10. “Russia Recognizes,” BBC News.

11. “UK Urges Tough Response to Russia,” BBC News, August 27, 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7583486.stm> (August 28, 2008).

12. David Cameron and Mirek Topolánek, “Russia Cannot Limit its Neighbours’ Liberty,” *Daily Telegraph*, August 26, 2008, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2008/08/26/do2602.xml> (August 28, 2008).