



# KOSOVO

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### **Q&A: South Ossetia dispute**

By Helen Womack, The Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/08/georgia.russia4>

#### ***Why has fighting broken out in South Ossetia?***

The South Ossetians and Georgians have been sniping at each other, both with words and guns, for several weeks now, and patience on both sides has finally snapped. South Ossetia and Georgia's other breakaway region, Abkhazia, have had de facto independence since the early 1990s, but Tbilisi has never recognised the loss of its territory. The dispute between Georgia and the two regions was called "the frozen conflict" because the issues remained unresolved but there was no fighting. The ice began to melt, and the heat to rise, earlier this year when the west recognised Kosovo, against Russia's advice. The South Ossetians and Abkhazians argued that if Kosovo could be independent, then so could they, and renewed their struggle for freedom.

#### ***What is the basis of the regions' claim to independence?***

The Ossetians are descendants of a tribe called the Alans. Like the Georgians, the Ossetians are orthodox Christians, but they have their own language. In Soviet times the Ossetians had an autonomous region within Georgia. The Georgians say the Ossetians cooperated with the Bolsheviks and tended to be more pro-Soviet. Their ethnic kin live across the border in the Russian region of North Ossetia, so they feel more drawn to Russia than to Georgia - and many have Russian passports.

Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast also had autonomy within Georgia during Soviet times. Because of its sub-tropical climate, it was the playground of Soviet leaders and is popular with Russian tourists today. It has a mixed population of Abkhazis, Mingrelians, Greeks, Armenians, Russians and Georgians, and a small but significant Muslim minority. Thousands of ethnic Georgians fled their homes in Abkhazia during the civil war at the beginning of the 1990s and now live as refugees in Tbilisi and Moscow.

#### ***Why has Russia become involved?***

Russia says it cannot stand aside because many of the people in the breakaway regions are now its citizens. Georgia says Russia is meddling in its internal affairs and supporting the separatists, although Russia's peacekeepers are supposed to be neutral. Georgia accuses Russia of double standards in suppressing its own separatist rebellion in Chechnya while encouraging separatists in Georgia. Russia has become more



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engaged in the region since Georgia expressed an interest in joining Nato, an idea that Russia staunchly opposes.

### ***What might happen next?***

So far, this has been a proxy war, with Russia encouraging the separatists, but Moscow and Tblisi could find themselves in direct conflict. Russia's prime minister, Vladimir Putin, today accused Georgia of aggression and warned that a response was inevitable. Georgia said Russian jets had started bombing its territory.

### ***What are the wider implications?***

The conflict could widen to bring in other Soviet republics, the US and Europe. The root of the problem is that the international community cannot agree on rules for the independence of small regions. Russia said that granting independence to Kosovo would set a dangerous precedent. Moscow now seems determined to prove it was right all along.