



# KOSOVO

## COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

---

August 13, 2008

## Balkan Shadows

By Robert McMahon, Newsweek  
<http://www.newsweek.com/id/152216>

Circumstances in two separatist Georgian border regions—South Ossetia in the north and Abkhazia in the northwest—brought Russia and Georgia into open conflict this month.

Though Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced an end to military attacks against Georgian forces on August 12, he said Russia reserves the right to renew attacks if it encounters Georgian resistance and stopped short of saying Moscow would withdraw from Georgia. Beyond the immediate triggers, some analysts see two international developments in the past six months as major catalysts for Russia's biggest military campaign outside its borders since the fall of the Soviet Union. The conflict could have consequences far beyond Georgia's borders for the West and Russia.

The first catalyst was recognition of Kosovo's February declaration of independence by the United States and European powers. Vladimir Putin, then Russia's president and now its powerful prime minister, had warned for years of the danger of recognizing Kosovo without Serbia's agreement. After it occurred, James Traub writes in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Putin responded by leveling a blow at America's Caucasus darling." Putin set in motion moves to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and stepped up patrols of

Russian forces—ostensibly peacekeepers—in those regions. Russia expert Dmitri Simes of the Nixon Center told a CFR meeting late last year that Western recognition of Kosovo would have to be followed by a "quid pro quo in the Caucasus or where we are [is] a new era in international relations" between Russia and the West.

Now, just days into Russia's offensive, writes the *Financial Times*'s Quentin Peel, the events in Georgia have become "Russia's Kosovo," including Russian portrayals of President Mikheil Saakashvili as a dangerous rogue in the mold of Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic. An analysis from the Russian news agency RIA Novosti described Saakashvili as unstable but a master propagandist. Soon after fighting broke out in South Ossetia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was voicing concern over Georgian "ethnic cleansing" of the region, conjuring a term from 1990s Bosnia and Kosovo.

A second international catalyst for Russia's offensive in Georgia was a decision at NATO's Bucharest summit in April. The alliance, in a bow to Russia, declined to consider Georgia and Ukraine right away for a Membership Action Plan, or MAP. But a NATO statement pledging to reconsider the two countries' bids in December



# KOSOVO

## COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

---

infuriated the Kremlin. Russia followed that decision by stepping up moves to upgrade its relations with the two breakaway Georgian regions, which it already provided with crucial economic support. Analysts have linked the strong Russian reaction with a growing feeling of isolation as countries on its periphery join Western institutions. That is now coupled with newfound Russian "prosperity and self-confidence and geopolitical entitlement" that give it an opportunity to reverse this trend, says CFR Senior Fellow Stephen Sestanovich in a new interview.

The challenge for Washington and European capitals, which have gradually boosted their ties with Saakashvili's democratically elected government, is what tack to take to restrain Russia. Beyond U.S. airlifts of Georgian forces out of Iraq and EU discussions about cutting off aid to Russia, there is concern that Western leverage appears limited. On the diplomatic side, there looks to be a need to revamp the international approach to brokering the region's "frozen conflicts." Before this month's fighting, the main tools of Western engagement in Georgia's frozen separatist conflicts—a UN observer mission in Abkhazia, and an OSCE mission in South Ossetia—had produced little enduring results in the past fifteen years.

Much depends on whether the August military campaign represents a turning point for Russian foreign policy. Former top Clinton administration officials Ronald D. Asmus and Richard Holbrooke write that this moment could be the end of an era in Europe when "spheres of influence were supposed to be replaced by new cooperative norms." CFR Adjunct Fellow Jeffrey Mankoff's recent profile of Russia's foreign policy elite notes that the "neo-imperialist" camp, keen for Russia to challenge the West for leadership, appears well positioned to grow in influence.