



KOSOVO

COMPROMISE 2007

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

August 27, 2008

Why I had to recognise Georgia's breakaway regions

By Dmitry Medvedev, Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9c7ad792-7395-11dd-8a66-0000779fd18c.html>

On Tuesday Russia recognised the independence of the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It was not a step taken lightly, or without full consideration of the consequences. But all possible outcomes had to be weighed against a sober understanding of the situation and the histories of the Abkhaz and Ossetian peoples, their freely expressed desire for independence, the tragic events of the past weeks and international precedents for such a move.

Not all of the world's nations have their own statehood. Many exist happily within boundaries shared with other nations. The Russian Federation is an example of largely harmonious coexistence by many dozens of nations and nationalities. But some nations find it impossible to live under the tutelage of another. Relations between nations living "under one roof" need to be handled with the utmost sensitivity.

After the collapse of communism, Russia reconciled itself to the "loss" of 14 former Soviet republics, which became states in their own right, even though some 25m Russians were left stranded in countries no longer their own. Some of those nations were unable to treat their own minorities with the respect they deserved. Georgia immediately stripped its "autonomous regions" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia of their autonomy.

Can you imagine what it was like for the Abkhaz people to have their university in Sukhumi closed down by the Tbilisi government on the grounds that they allegedly had no proper language or history or culture and so did not need a university? The newly independent Georgia inflicted a vicious war on its minority nations, displacing thousands of people and sowing seeds of discontent that could only grow. These were tinderboxes, right on Russia's doorstep, which Russian peacekeepers strove to keep from igniting.

But the west, ignoring the delicacy of the situation, unwittingly (or wittingly) fed the hopes of the South Ossetians and Abkhazians for freedom. They clasped to their bosom a Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, whose first move was to crush the autonomy of another region, Adjara, and made no secret of his intention to squash the Ossetians and Abkhazians.

Meanwhile, ignoring Russia's warnings, western countries rushed to recognise Kosovo's illegal declaration of independence from Serbia. We argued consistently that it would be impossible, after that, to tell the Abkhazians and Ossetians (and dozens of other groups around the world) that what was good for the Kosovo Albanians was not



KOSOVO

COMPROMISE 2007

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

good for them. In international relations, you cannot have one rule for some and another rule for others.

Seeing the warning signs, we persistently tried to persuade the Georgians to sign an agreement on the non-use of force with the Ossetians and Abkhazians. Mr Saakashvili refused. On the night of August 7-8 we found out why.

Only a madman could have taken such a gamble. Did he believe Russia would stand idly by as he launched an all-out assault on the sleeping city of Tskhinvali, murdering hundreds of peaceful civilians, most of them Russian citizens? Did he believe Russia would stand by as his "peacekeeping" troops fired on Russian comrades with whom they were supposed to be preventing trouble in South Ossetia?

Russia had no option but to crush the attack to save lives. This was not a war of our choice. We have no designs on Georgian territory. Our troops entered Georgia to destroy bases from which the attack was launched and then left. We restored the peace but could not calm the fears and aspirations of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian peoples – not when Mr Saakashvili continued (with the complicity and encouragement of the US and some other Nato members) to talk of rearming his forces and reclaiming "Georgian territory". The presidents of the two republics appealed to Russia to recognise their independence.

A heavy decision weighed on my shoulders. Taking into account the freely expressed views of the Ossetian and Abkhazian peoples, and based on the principles of the United Nations charter and other documents of international law, I signed a decree on the Russian Federation's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. I sincerely hope that the Georgian people, to whom we feel historic friendship and sympathy, will one day have leaders they deserve, who care about their country and who develop mutually respectful relations with all the peoples in the Caucasus. Russia is ready to support the achievement of such a goal.

The writer is president of the Russian Federation