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Medvedev Stands By Post-War Republics

By Anatoly Medetsky

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President Dmitry Medvedev conversing with Abkhazia's president, Sergei Bagapsh, on Sunday in Abkhazia's capital. **Dmitry Astakhov**

President Dmitry Medvedev visited Abkhazia to defend Moscow's recognition of the breakaway republic Sunday, two years after a war with Georgia over the territory and nearby South Ossetia.

In a further show of support, the Russian government said Friday that it would donate nearly $330 million to the two breakaway regions next year to build roads and power plants, while asking South Ossetia and Abkhazia to model their economic legislation after Russia's.

Medvedev told Russian tourists that the country had prevented a much more dramatic turn of events by recognizing the regions as independent on Aug. 26, 2008, two weeks after the war ended.

"The decision was difficult, but I don't regret anything," he said. "If it hadn't been for the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we wouldn't be having coffee here now.

Everything would have developed into a long, bloody conflict."

The brief, five-day hostilities resurrected Cold War-style divisions and rhetoric between Moscow and the West, but the ties gradually mended after U.S. President Barack Obama announced a reset in relations with Russia last year.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said in a radio address broadcast Saturday — the anniversary of when Georgian troops invaded South Ossetia two years ago, prompting Russia to strike back the next day — that his country's historic mission was to "liberate" the regions.

In Moscow, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Friday that Russia would budget 9.8 billion rubles ($329 million) to build roads and power plants, and to develop telecoms in the separatist regions next year. He was responding to First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, who said the two new states required a lot of investment in infrastructure before local and foreign private businesses would want to operate there.

Russia will earmark 6.8 billion rubles for South Ossetia in 2011 — 45 percent more than Moscow set aside for this year — and 3 billion rubles for Abkhazia, unchanged from its spending this year, Putin said.

Shuvalov said previous funding, which Russia began disbursing after the war, had achieved its intended effect.

"We agreed to rebuild certain roads and communications lines. This work has been completed," Shuvalov said, following a trip to the two regions. "Communications lines, including mobile communications, are up and running. We have checked."

As Moscow is sinking money into the regions' economies, it wants them to draft economic legislation that would be like Russia's, Putin said. Shuvalov responded that he had reached an understanding on the issue with the separatist governments.

Russia is seeking to remove all hurdles for goods and money to travel to South Ossetia and Abkhazia and back, and to have a common approach to regulating the market, said Boris Shmelyov, director of the Center for Comparative Political Research at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

"The economies of these tiny states must become part of the Russian economy," he said. "There's no way around it. Otherwise, they will just not survive."

In other economic support, many residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia get more than 1 billion rubles in retirement pensions from Moscow because they hold Russian passports. Russia is also spending billions of rubles on transportation links with the separatist states and fortifying their borders.

Russia will assist Abkhazia in building an airport and organizing air traffic, Medvedev said during a visit to the region's capital Sukhumi, where he chatted with Russian tourists, who flock to the area's scenic Black Sea coast. Local beach resorts should be comparable to their close foreign competition in Turkey, he said.

Medvedev also walked into a music hall and a secondary school being rebuilt with Russian

money.

The independent Levada Center said last week that 64 percent of Russians felt that their government did "everything possible to prevent an escalation of the conflict and bloodshed," up from 57 percent a year earlier.

The poll of 1,600 people in early July had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

Saakashvili also chose to travel for the anniversary of the war. He made the radio speech during a visit to Colombia for the inauguration of Juan Manuel Santos as its president, a ceremony where he appeared to represent the most remote country.

He may have made the effort of traveling so far in an attempt to counterweigh the campaign for support that South Ossetian and Abkhaz government representatives have been waging in Latin America. Saakashvili is hoping to prevent the separatist governments from emerging out of international isolation, Shmelyov said.

“He will pursue this line there. It's a good podium to promote his point of view and blame Russia on the Latin American continent,” he said.

Leaders from just three countries other than Russia have recognized the independence of the regions: Venezuela, Nicaragua and the small South Pacific island nation of Nauru. Putin has attributed the lack of mass support to “pressure” from the United States.

Colombia is a strong U.S. ally in the region, which has difficult relations with neighboring Venezuela. South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity said earlier this month that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez would visit his country soon.

South Ossetian and Abkhaz envoys have thoroughly toured Latin America in an effort to galvanize sympathy for their case — apparently prompted by strong anti-U.S. feelings in some of the area's countries, Shmelyov said.

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