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3 Years On, Georgia Has Never Been This Weak

By Paul Rimple

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Three years after Russia debased Georgia in the war over South Ossetia, President Dmitry Medvedev is still trying to sell the idea that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is a war criminal. In an Aug. 4 interview with Ekho Moskvy, Russia Today and PIK, a Georgian television channel, Medvedev said Saakashvili "should be tried by an international tribunal for unleashing the war in Tskhinvali."

This kind of rhetoric is an example of why the Russia-Georgia peace process remains deadlocked. If Medvedev really wanted justice, he'd have plenty to answer for. Russia violated international law by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and using indiscriminate force against Georgia. Additionally, Russia's repeated accusations that Georgia committed genocide proved false, but that it allowed the ethnic cleansing of Georgian villages proved to be true.

Yet Russia can afford to play the rhetoric game because it has nothing to lose. According to

International Crisis Group, there are about 5,000 Russian troops in Abkhazia and 4,500 in South Ossetia, giving them a strong foothold in the Caucasus. This means that Russian missiles and tanks are only 40 kilometers away from Tbilisi.

Saakashvili's response has been to travel the world and claim that Georgia's legally recognized borders are occupied by Russian troops. The problem is the world can do nothing about it. The U.S. Senate's recent resolution, passed unanimously, also states that Russia has "occupied" Georgia and thus reaffirms the U.S. unilateral support for Georgia's territorial integrity. But in reality, the resolution changes nothing except to antagonize Russia even more.

With Georgia's NATO prospects killed and Russian troops entrenched 40 kilometers from Tbilisi, Georgia has never been so vulnerable.

The situation doesn't leave Georgia with many options. Russia won't bend, and the West is not going to solve the impasse. The World Trade Organization veto is Georgia's only leverage to achieve any sort of breakthrough in relations. But it's only a possibility, not a trump card.

Georgia needs to start thinking out of the bubble and reconsider how it deals with the separatists if it is earnest about changing the status quo. The Abkhaz are still under demographic threat — only now from the Russians. Georgia could take more active steps to normalize relations by helping facilitate Abkhaz links with the West and open trade links across the border.

The current environment is not sustainable and demands a more creative policy than playing the victim and waiting for something in Russia to change.

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