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Medvedev Takes Credit for South Ossetian War

By Nabi Abdullaev

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Medvedev speaking to journalists Thursday in Sochi, where he criticized Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. **Vladimir Rodionov**

Three years after the brief South Ossetian war, the personal animosity of the Russian leadership toward Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili remains the biggest obstacle in relations between the two countries, according to President Dmitry Medvedev.

In his first interview with Georgian media since the 2008 conflict, Medvedev stressed repeatedly that it was he, not his political patron Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who made the crucial decision to go to war with Georgia over the maverick region of South Ossetia.

But Medvedev — who repeatedly described himself as a "young" and "liberal" president in the interview, given at his residence at the Black Sea resort of Sochi on Thursday — provided no hint on whether he intends to keep his decision-making post by running for re-election next March.

"Saakashvili has committed a crime against the Russian Federation and its citizens. Hundreds of our citizens, including peacekeepers, were killed on his order," Medvedev said in an interview with Georgian PIK-TV, Russian Ekho Moskvy radio and state-owned Russia Today, given on the eve of the war's third anniversary.

"I will never forgive him for that, and this is why I will not deal with him, though he has repeatedly tried to wink at me at different international venues," Medvedev said during the interview, a transcript of which was released Friday on the Kremlin web site. He added that Saakashvili is "clingy."

Medvedev said that only a new Georgian president would have a chance at restoring productive relations with Russia. Saakashvili's term expires in 2013, a year after Russia's presidential vote, in which either Putin or Medvedev are expected to participate. Both have repeatedly said they will not compete against each other, but they have kept silent on who will run.

On Aug. 7, 2008, Georgian troops shelled civilian targets in the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, and a Russian peacekeepers' base there. The next day, Russian military forces poured into the separatist republic.

After five days of fighting that ended with the mediation of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Moscow recognized the independence of South Ossetia and another Georgian separatist republic, Abkhazia. Most residents of the two regions carry Russian passports.

No progress has been achieved in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi since then, despite the efforts of the European Union and United States to mediate a rapprochement. Russia and Georgia routinely accuse each other of espionage and sabotage.

Tbilisi's demand that it control customs offices on Russia's border with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to which Russia will not concede, is the biggest stumbling block to Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization.

Medvedev said Russia would not make concessions on this issue to win accession to the WTO, which the country has been seeking since 1993.

Calling the night of Aug. 7, 2008, the "most difficult" in his life, Medvedev said he did not talk to Putin — who is widely seen as the senior member of the ruling tandem — for a whole day after ordering troops to be sent into South Ossetia. Putin was at the Olympic Games in Beijing when the conflict started.

"We got in touch the day after. I had already issued all orders," Medvedev said.

The president also denied that Russia might annex South Ossetia. Speculation began to swirl last week after Putin admitted that such a move would be possible if it reflected the will of the South Ossetians.

"There is no legal basis for it at the moment," Medvedev said.

Medvedev also took a swipe at the U.S. Senate, which adopted a resolution last week calling on Russia to withdraw its troops from South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

"This is a foreign parliament, and it is their own business," Medvedev said of the Senate resolution, which he described as being driven by "the views of some of its senile members."

"I don't care about their rhetoric," he said.

Medvedev also said Georgia is a non-issue in Russia's current relations with its European partners.

"This may be a bit offensive for Georgia, but I can honestly tell you that this topic is absent from the agenda of my talks with European leaders," he said.

The conflict with Georgia, then aspiring to NATO membership, and recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia all but froze Russia's ties with the alliance for several months in 2008.

Georgia and Russia have not restored diplomatic relations since the conflict. Georgia's interests in Russia are represented by the Swiss consular service, though even this meager diplomatic connection was apparently severed last week, RIA-Novosti reported Friday.

The Georgian interests section of the Swiss consulate in Moscow was closed, with the only explanation being a note on the door blaming the move on "hindrances created by the Russian side," the report said.

The agency quoted unidentified Georgian diplomats as saying Russian officials had cut off electricity in their offices. No comments from the Russian side on this topic were released over the weekend.

Official Tbilisi snapped back at Medvedev on Saturday, with Saakashvili spokeswoman Manana Mandzhgaladze calling his speech "worrisome" and "a cynical condoning of the ethnic purges, military aggression and occupation committed by the Russian Federation."

Georgian authorities are willing to seek "civilized" relations with Russia, but Moscow needs to "respect the country's territorial integrity" and give up "aggressive policies," she said, Interfax reported.

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