

Dmitry Medvedev's interview with Kommersant newspaper

10 years after the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict.

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Question: Mr Medvedev, the August 2008 war seemed unavoidable even before it started. Did you have the same feeling?

Dmitry Medvedev: No, it was not at all unavoidable. And I still think that there would not have been a war if not for the irresponsible, immoral and criminal actions of Saakashvili and his minions.

Indeed, tensions were running very high. However, they did not begin in 2008. It all started back in 1991. The tension between various component parts of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic was palpable even before that.

I remember going from Sochi to Abkhazia for the first time in 1990, when it was part of Georgia. As I talked with ordinary people in small restaurants and other places, I sensed their complicated attitude to the processes gathering momentum in the republic and to members of neighbouring ethnic groups. In other words, tensions were growing at the everyday level. It came as a shock to me, because there was nothing of the kind in Moscow or Leningrad.

Therefore, the problem is rooted in the events of the 1990s, the decisions taken in Tbilisi then, which Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not accept. All of this led to a conflict and the deployment of [Russian] peacekeepers.

We managed to provide a counterbalance to these negative processes, statements and even sporadic violence until 2008.

But in 2008 the Georgian Government led by the Georgian President gave the green light to aggression, and what happened, happened. But it was not unavoidable. It was the choice of Saakashvili and his team.

Question: It seemed at some point that you had a rather good relationship with him. At what time something went wrong? You met and communicated with each other...

Dmitry Medvedev: Yes, it looked quite good at the beginning, and during our first meeting, soon after I took office as the President of Russia, he [Saakashvili] said he would like to restore relations and hoped to get along. In short, he said many kind words. I listened to him and replied: If you want to improve relations, let's do it. We want to have normal and friendly relations with our neighbour, Georgia, and we are ready for this. We are aware of the internal conflict, which has split Georgia, and we are ready to

help slowly and carefully reunify the country so as to preserve it within the national borders as a federation, confederation or in any other form. It could be a choice of all ethnic groups living in Georgia at that time, including Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians. He said he was ready to proceed. Later we met several times at various events, including in Astana, where he indicated a desire to discuss things and to improve relations. And then he vanished. Before that, we had coordinated some meetings and contacts, and then he completely vanished in early July 2008, which I remember clearly. I did not make too much of this, but today I think that it was a deliberate act. On the one hand, he hoped that the new leader of Russia would take a different stand on relations with his government and him personally. That is, that I would not interfere in whatever happened in Georgia, and that I would not react in any way to actions undertaken against Russian peacekeepers and, most importantly, Russian citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On the other hand, I think that by that time he'd had full-scale consultations with his patrons, primarily the United States. As you know, the then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited him. Before that, he had contacts with Mr Daniel Fried, an expert on the Soviet Union who was responsible for relations with the former Soviet republics. He was extremely anti-Russian.

I think that Dick Cheney also visited Georgia at the time. In other words, everyone of importance had been to Tbilisi, which, I think, convinced Saakashvili that the Americans would support him in any situation.

Question: And so, what happened, happened. And you decided to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some say that the decision was not uncontroversial and there were opponents who thought it was a bad idea. How did it all happen? How was the decision adopted?

Dmitry Medvedev: I can tell you about that. There is nothing extraordinary in it. Any decision must be thoroughly considered and adopted only after carefully weighing the pros and cons. After the military operation to enforce peace on Georgia, we – primarily me as the head of state – thought about what should be done next.

I spent some time considering the problem and came to the conclusion that the best solution would be to recognise the independence of these two entities. My priority was to maintain lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus and the region as a whole. I believe it was the only possible solution.

Awhile later, I discussed this issue with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. He supported my decision. After that, it was taken up by Russia's Security Council. Of course, we discussed all aspects of the decision since we knew the reaction it would produce. But my colleagues at the Security Council supported me as well.

The decision was formally adopted. I signed an executive order recognising the national sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on 26 August 2008. A new life began for them on that day.

Question: Does this mean that no discussions were held and that the decision was adopted unanimously?

Dmitry Medvedev: There were and there will always be discussions, which is normal for any civil society. The subject was discussed at that time as well, as you can see from the media and the internet. But the position of the supreme political leadership was unanimous.

Question: I know people who work for the Russian government agencies who say that we should not have granted recognition but rather dangled it, and that we should have deployed troops there while also leaving open a window open for discussing the matter with Georgia and ultimately for resuming relations with it. What do you think about this?

Dmitry Medvedev: You see, dangling a decision can be good because it creates an opportunity for real discussion, as you say. But regrettably, it will not solve the main problem, because it leaves space for the use of force.

However, nobody would take action against independent territorial entities, or states, with which we have agreements to deploy our troops. Everyone knows that taking on Russia is more costly than simply advocating utopian ideas. Dangling recognition would have left the door open to periodic provocations, thinking that one more foolish military campaign might finally do the trick.

But there was no other option, considering that Georgia was led by a mentally unstable person, Mikheil Saakashvili. Had it been someone else, we could have discussed the problem. I am convinced that another leader would not have made the barbarous decision to attack children and old people, as well as Russian peacekeepers, which was tantamount to declaring war on Russia.

Question: I was in Georgia then and remember the Russian tanks stopped a few dozen kilometres from Tbilisi. Why did they stop?

Dmitry Medvedev: Because our goal was to force the Georgian troops to retreat from Tskhinval and to restore order. We also wanted to prevent any escalation of violence, that is, military operations. We did not want to defeat Georgia or execute Saakashvili. I believe I acted correctly when I decided to show restraint rather than force further action.

Ultimately, this allowed us to calm the situation not only in Georgia, Ossetia and Abkhazia, but also to calm relations with the EU and other countries. You may remember that we came to an agreement on this problem rather quickly, despite the initially harsh response, and that the Heidi Tagliavini commission concluded that Georgia launched the first strike and committed aggression.

Of course, there were comments regarding our actions and the allegedly disproportionate use of force, and so on. But these are value judgements. The main thing is that Georgia was deemed to have started the aggression. This will not be stricken from the historical record. But I did not want to keep up the confrontation. This is why I as Supreme Commander-in-Chief ordered the troops to withdraw and return to Russia.

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Question: Many people were surprised at the speed with which relations between Russia and the West normalised. The EU and Russia launched the Partnership for Modernisation, Russian-US relations were reset, and you had a warm relationship with President Barack Obama.

Dmitry Medvedev: True, and my working relationship with President George Bush was also completely normal even in the immediate aftermath. We met in late 2008 and he did not even mention Georgia or the problem with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We mostly discussed economic matters, in light of the emerging global crisis.

Question: But today we see the most recent in a series of crises in relations between Russia and the West, this time over Ukraine (or that is where it began at least). Why was the fallout from the 2008 crisis so quickly overcome, and why are Russia and the West at such loggerheads now?

Dmitry Medvedev: These are two different situations. Different people are in charge there now, and our partners are taking a totally different stand. But the main thing is that these are two fundamentally different stories. Frankly speaking, if our partners, instead of trying to shift the blame for Ukraine onto Russia, were more cooperative and took a more balanced stand, as they did in 2008, this new problem would have been much easier to settle.

Question: Let's get back to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What has Russia gained from recognising their independence? Has it received any strategic or geopolitical advantages?

Dmitry Medvedev: Russia gained the main thing, peace. We have protected our citizens, and there are many Russian citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. And we are no longer worried about any new attacks, or that we will have to intervene or strike back to protect our citizens and our security. As a result of what we did back then, the situation in the region is clear. This is the main point.

Question: You mentioned the United States in connection with the actions of the then Georgian leadership. You said several times afterwards that the United States actively helped Georgia. Some say that Russia has spoiled the West's game by recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, referring to the attempts to accelerate Georgia's integration into NATO. It is widely believed that this is the reason behind the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the subsequent deployment of Russian military bases and everything else taking place there now. How much of this is true?

Dmitry Medvedev: I won't speak in terms of spoiling games. I will only say that we witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation. And yet NATO is still standing and even attempting to encircle Russia. The point is not whether Russia's political leadership is liked or disliked, or differences in ideological principles and values. It boils down to very simple things that are obvious to anyone. There are no two blocs in a state of confrontation or even conflict now, such as between the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and NATO. Yet NATO is still here. Moreover, it is expanding and doing its best to bring in more and more countries. We can't

close our eyes to this, because the principle of nuclear parity remains, as does the fact that military leaders must be aware of the size of various countries' strategic nuclear forces. Whatever our colleagues from NATO countries may say, they do regard Russia as a potential adversary. It is obvious that their military capabilities, including the nuclear triad, are targeted at Russia. Regrettably, this is a fact.

Consequently, we must know how we can counterbalance this. As the circle around Russia draws tighter and the number of NATO members continues to grow, this naturally worries us. And so we must think not only about the threats posed by strategic nuclear forces, but also about the tactical nuclear weapons that acquire the characteristics of strategic nuclear arms as they are moved ever closer to Russia's borders, as well as about conventional weapons, which, considering their precision strike capability, can do terrible damage.

In other words, NATO expansion is a clear threat to Russia. And it is also a clear challenge.

As for the recent NATO decision reaffirming its commitment to eventually admit Georgia, what can I say to this? It is an absolutely irresponsible position and a threat to peace. Everyone knows about the internal tensions in Georgia, which believes that the neighbouring territories, which we regard as independent countries, still belong to it. It is an unsettled territorial conflict, whatever anyone's positions. Can you imagine what would happen if Georgia were to join a military bloc?

This could provoke a terrible conflict. I don't understand what they are doing this for. It's one thing if it's a diplomatic trick and they are only saying they will admit Georgia but will not actually take any practical steps towards this. If this is so, we suggest that our NATO colleagues tell us where else they might play this trick. For example, they might invite Kosovo to join the alliance, or the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Will this improve the situation in the world?

Question: You answered my question before I could ask it. Just one more point: nobody has set a deadline for Georgia's admission, but what will happen if Georgia is allowed to join NATO without Abkhazia and South Ossetia? Is there potential for a conflict involving Russia?

Dmitry Medvedev: Yes, clearly so, because we view Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. We maintain friendly relations and have military bases there. We understand that if any other country claims that they are part of its national territory, this may have severe consequences. Therefore, I hope that the NATO leadership will have enough sense not to take any steps in this direction.

Question: None of the countries considered Russia's allies have recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I am referring primarily to our allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan keep silent on this score. Who are Russia's real allies? It sometimes looks as if they are Abkhazia, South

Ossetia, Transnistria and, since recently, Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic.

Dmitry Medvedev: I knew it would be a very difficult conversation. When it all happened, I said at some event attended by my colleagues that I knew it was a very tough choice and would not try to force their hand, and that they were free to do as they thought best. I said we don't want this to be our decision; we want this to be their decision. We still have our commitments under the CSTO, but this is quite another matter. Actually, this was the basis of our relations with our partners on that issue.

Question: Back before the war in Georgia, you proposed signing a European security treaty. A draft of this treaty was prepared after the war, but there has been no movement since. Has this initiative been laid to rest, or can it still be revived, considering the talk about the need to coordinate rules of the game in international affairs?

Dmitry Medvedev: Nothing is ever laid to rest in international affairs. Any idea can be revived, if there is the will.

A lot has happened since then. We were able to rise above these problems with the EU despite the August 2008 conflict. In a manner of speaking, we did this also with the United States: we signed the New START Treaty and discussed different options for European security treaties. We joined the Partnership for Modernisation with a few dozen other countries.

I don't think the current problems will last forever. I believe that our European neighbours are coming to see that it is better to work together and be friends than to keep telling us we are wrong. I hope the United States and its leadership will eventually see this as well. Our door is open. The more so that it was not us who initiated the sanctions campaign, restrictions, the expulsion of diplomats and economic pressure. In this sense, the ball has always been in their court. They only need to indicate a desire to resume relations. We are always ready and willing.

Question: Speaking about Georgia: has recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia made restoring ties impossible? It is a sticking point for them.

Dmitry Medvedev: I don't think it is a problem that will always define relations between Russia and Georgia.

As I said, there is a different government in Georgia now. Saakashvili's career in Georgia is most likely over, which is good for Georgia, as I see it. We are willing to develop relations with the new Georgian leadership, no matter the names or party affiliation. Diplomatic relations can be restored – we were not the ones who severed them anyway. If our Georgian colleagues are willing, we will not say no.

Our trade and economic cooperation has picked up significantly over the past few years. That includes tourism. Flights have resumed, and people are going on vacation to Georgia. These are positive developments. I hope that ultimately this will also help normalise our political ties and resume full-

scale dialogue between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Remark: Thank you.