
Russian parliament votes to recognise Georgia breakaway regions

Tony Halpin in Tbilisi
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Russian tanks in Georgia: the vote may be used as a bargaining chip to keep troops in the country

Russia's parliament voted unanimously to recognise the independence of Georgia's two breakaway regions today in a direct challenge to the West.

The Federation Council voted 130-0 to ask President Dmitri Medvedev to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Russia's lower house of parliament, the Duma, followed shortly after with a 447-0 vote in favour of recognition.

The votes throw down the gauntlet to the West over its support for the democratic regime of President Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia. The final decision will rest with Mr Medvedev, who has already declared his readiness to "make the decision which unambiguously supports the will of these two Caucasus peoples".

It remains to be seen if he will defy intense international pressure by recognising the two regions. The United States, European Union and Nato have all backed Georgia's territorial integrity, including South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The Kremlin is certain to point to the precedent established in Kosovo, against Russia's ally Serbia, to justify any decision to recognise the two regions. But Mr Medvedev may stall any decision and use the parliamentary vote as a political lever to extract concessions over the continuing presence of Russian "peacekeepers" on Georgian soil.

Having fought two bitter wars to crush Chechnya's aspirations for independence from Russia, the Kremlin will also be nervous about establishing a precedent for separatist sentiment within its own borders.

The West has demanded a full withdrawal of Russian troops stationed at "peacekeeping" checkpoints deep inside Georgia, something Moscow rejects. The deputy chief of the general staff risked a further backlash today by telling reporters in Moscow that soldiers would inspect cargo coming in and out of Georgia's Black Sea port of Poti.

"The Russian contingent is carrying out patrolling duties in Poti. Within the framework of those tasks is the regular inspection of cargo which is brought in and out of the port. These checks are carried out on a regular basis," Colonel-General Anatoly Nogovitsyn said.

President Saakashvili accused Russia of attempting to "change Europe's borders by force" following the war over South Ossetia. He told the French newspaper Liberation that the move would have "disastrous consequences" for Russia too.

"It is a classic invasion which has nothing to do with international law," he said, adding that the ceasefire negotiated by President Sarkozy of France had been a "rescue operation" that prevented Russian tanks entering the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

South Ossetia's separatist leader, Eduard Kokoity, told the Federation Council that Russia had averted "genocide" in his region, which had more grounds than Kosovo to claim independence. Abkhazia's president Sergei Bagapsh said: "Neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia will ever again live in one state with Georgia."

Experts suggested that Mr Medvedev would avoid full recognition, though the influence of Vladimir Putin, the Prime Minister, may be decisive in ignoring Western pressure.

Mr Putin detests Mr Saakashvili and was very visibly in charge of the military operation against Georgia, relegating Mr Medvedev to a spectator.

"Right after the conflict with Georgia, Russia would look very indecent if it immediately annexed South Ossetia and Abkhazia," Yevgeny Volk, of the US-based Heritage Foundation, said. "Russia will be perfectly content if they are pseudo-independent states," Mr Volk added, drawing a parallel with Northern Cyprus, which is only recognised by Turkey.

The EU has grown increasingly exasperated at Russia's refusal to withdraw its troops completely from Georgia. Mr Sarkozy, who holds the rotating EU presidency, yesterday called an emergency summit for September 1 to discuss relations with Russia.

But divisions within Europe over the best response to Russia's first military intervention since the end of the Cold War were quickly exposed in remarks by Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister. He told France Inter radio that, despite problems in the relationship, "we are not talking about sanctions" against Russia.
