

Georgian Daily
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Why did Russia really invade Georgia? In late September, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov appeared before the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and offered a rather stunning explanation. Lavrov--who previously spent a decade as Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, where he mastered the body of international precedents and U.N. Security Council resolutions that together make up the de facto law of nations--informed his audience that, by attacking Georgia, Moscow was implementing a principle endorsed by the Security Council in 2006: the "**responsibility to protect.**"

Lavrov was referring to the U.N.'s new legal justification for intervention in the internal affairs of a member state. The concept--which arose out of the world's failure to stop genocide in Rwanda--envisions nations joining together to protect potential victims of mass human rights abuses or genocide, even if that means trampling on the sovereignty of another country by using military force. The inaugural test of this new principle came in Darfur. To date, no nation, including the United States, seems willing to live up to this "responsibility." But Russia, according to its foreign minister, is now doing exactly that. "If all this talk about '**responsibility to protect**' is going to remain just talk," Lavrov said, "if all this talk about human security is going to be used only to initiate some pathetic debate in the United Nations and elsewhere, then we believe this is wrong. So, we exercised the human security maxim. We exercised the **responsibility to protect**."

Russia had previously accused Georgia of committing genocide against South Ossetia--despite the fact that the most reliable independent reporting has concluded that fewer than 100 civilians died during Georgia's initial incursion into the region. On August 30, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Georgia's goal was the "extermination of the peaceful population in South Ossetia" and asked, "What is this if it's not genocide?" None of this--the accusation of genocide, the invocation of "**responsibility to protect**"--was an accident. For it was the threat of genocide against Kosovo's Albanians that prompted nato, led by the United States, to initiate military action against Russia's ally Serbia in 1999. Now, Russia is seeking to turn the tables--to exploit the human rights rhetoric of the West in order to establish international acceptance for a sphere of influence in Central Asia and other parts of the former Soviet Union. On September 12, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev made the analogy explicit: "There is certainly no serious argument which would allow one to ... separate the process of the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from the decisions taken with regard to Kosovo."

According to the International Crisis Group, the United States and Europe are "struggling to come to terms with Russia's attempts to portray its support for breakaway regions in Georgia as a mirror image of what they did in Kosovo." It shouldn't really be such a struggle. For the truth is

that Moscow's comparison is nonsense. Kosovo was all about moral intervention. Georgia is all about geopolitical resentment. It is imperative that the West not fall into Russia's analogy trap.

At least since the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, America has been the world's leading champion of self-determination. Russia, on the other hand, is rarely the first stop in a fledgling nation's campaign to win international recognition. Nor is Moscow a top destination for human rights campaigners trying to drum up support for action to stop ethnic cleansing, mass murder, or genocide. Indeed, until Georgia's attack on South Ossetia prompted a Russian invasion of Georgia itself, Russian foreign policy has been marked by a preference for the inviolability of national borders and a downright reluctance to support international action, especially military action, in the service of human rights. What's changed is that, after Georgia's offensive against South Ossetia this August, Moscow saw an opportunity to lock in an analogy to Kosovo--an analogy that was extraordinarily misleading. ()

America and Russia share a large number of common interests; we can and should work together on non-proliferation, climate change, terrorism, and the Middle East peace process. But we must also see to it that Russia pays a heavy price for its use of force in August. Fortunately, this is already happening. Moscow's diplomatic isolation is nearly unanimous. Even before the financial crisis struck last month, Russia's market was collapsing as a result of the Georgian war, making a mockery of Putin's boast that Moscow would soon be the world's financial center. In conjunction with the Putin era's domestic assault on political parties, the press, and civil society, the invasion of Georgia has done long-term damage to Russia's reputation. It will be a long time before Russia is considered a responsible power--notwithstanding Foreign Minister Lavrov's ruminations about the **responsibility to protect**.

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