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Enclave Hails Tight Embrace From Moscow

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TSKHINVALI, Georgia — The last time South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia — the last three times, actually — hardly anyone noticed. Even Russia, its great friend to the north, declined to take up the cause.

South Ossetia is a piece of mountainous land with a population of around 70,000. The capital, Tskhinvali, is a



mess of crumbling apartment blocks, their facades pocked with bullet holes. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has had no economy to speak of, except for apple orchards and illegal trade in drugs, armaments and counterfeit hundred-dollar bills.

But a lot has changed in the last two weeks.

First Georgia, then Russia, sent troops into South Ossetia, making the tiny territory the center of a cold war-style struggle between Russia and the West. On Monday, Tskhinvali residents listened over a loudspeaker in the city's main square to a live broadcast from Moscow, where the Russian Parliament voted unanimously to support independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a second breakaway region, on Georgia's Black Sea coast.

The news spread quickly, and people leaned out car windows with Russian and South Ossetian flags, spraying pedestrians with Champagne.

"Finally, finally, Russia has acknowledged that we exist, and that we have suffered," said Vova Bakayev, 41, an Ossetian soldier stationed outside Tskhinvali's makeshift International Press Center.

Official recognition will require the signature of the Russian president, Dmitri A. Medvedev. Even then, its relevance would be largely symbolic. Most Western countries have pledged to support Georgia's territorial integrity, and Georgian officials say a unilateral recognition by Russia would be meaningless.

But that hardly dampened spirits in Tskhinvali. The capital was shelled by Georgian forces on Aug. 7, sending many of its people to cower in basements. But Russia quickly stormed in, chasing out Georgian troops and pushing well into Georgia proper. It has mostly pulled back but has maintained a strong troop presence in South Ossetia.

Citizens here said the military action and parliamentary vote amounted to a lasting pledge of protection by Russia and its allies.

“I think after Russia, we will be recognized by, for example, Belgrade, for example, China, and maybe Syria, and also Belarus,” said Alexei Sanokoyev, 23, an analyst for the South Ossetian government’s foreign policy department, which has covered its broken windows with clear plastic sheeting.

“And Cuba, of course,” he added.

As Georgia grappled with two separatist regions, Abkhazia was always the bigger prize: it occupies a strategic position on the Black Sea coast, and was a beloved seaside resort in Soviet days. South Ossetia could not even boast of a gravel and concrete industry, as Abkhazia could. Many longtime observers expected hostilities to flare up in Abkhazia, whose separatist leaders have adamantly demanded independence.

In South Ossetia, by contrast, most people want to become part of Russia. The South Ossetians are part of a larger ethnic group that settled on both sides of the Caucasus. They dream of reuniting with the North Ossetians to restore Alania, an ancient kingdom they believe was home to their ancestors, the Scythians.

The South Ossetian separatists set their clocks to Moscow time, an hour earlier than Tbilisi, and have used rubles as their currency. In 2004, they appealed directly to the Russian Duma to appropriate the territory. And on the street on Monday, the rush of gratitude toward Russia was shot through with fury at the West and the Georgian president, [Mikheil Saakashvili](#).

“Everything Saakashvili does is organized by your country, and every child here knows this,” Murad Dzhioyev, South Ossetia’s minister for foreign affairs, told an American reporter. “Western taxpayers should think where their taxes go. We are killed by Western weapons.”

The dissolution of the Soviet Union left this place a cauldron of ethnic tension.

In 1990, Georgia’s president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, abolished autonomous regions, stripping South Ossetia of the self-determination it enjoyed in Soviet days. A war broke out, in which about 1,000 people were killed, and the once-friendly relations between Georgians and South Ossetians turned poisonous.

That war left Tskhinvali battered and depopulated. Even at full strength, South Ossetia's total population could not have filled China's National Stadium, where the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics took place. Now, many have fled to Moscow or Rostov-on-Don to escape the fighting. Working-age men who remain can be seen stalking the capital's streets in packs, heavily armed. The city's one functioning outdoor market offered little but cheap Russian trinkets.

One industry that continued to thrive was the smuggling through the Roki Tunnel, which cuts through the huge ridge of the Caucasus. Consumer goods poured south from Russia, avoiding Georgian duties, and crime rings transported drugs north from Central Asia and Afghanistan. At the vast market in Eregvi, a visitor could find plentiful tax-free consumer goods, bricks of black tar heroin and AK-47s.

Mr. Dzhiyoyev denied there was smuggling in the area, calling it "Saakashvili's invention."

In 2004, when President Saakashvili shut the market down and established fortified border posts, it strangled what was left of the South Ossetian economy.

Meanwhile, the Georgian government financed building projects in Georgian-occupied villages — gleaming cinemas, banks and electronics stores that the Ossetians could glimpse from their own impoverished strongholds. In the summer, the city of Tskhinvali often runs short of drinking water because Georgian farming communities have diverted water from pipelines north of the city, according to a report by the International Crisis Group.

For many in Tskhinvali, Russian support for independence meant, as Zaur Kudukov, a resident, put it, "freedom from Georgia."

"They humiliated us, they laughed at us," he said. "They said, 'You're Ossetian, you're mediocre people.'" Mr. Kudukov, 72, said that he had quit drinking 18 years ago but that he would celebrate Monday night.

"I will pour a glass to say, long live our freedom," he said.

It is not clear what an independent South Ossetia would look like. Shota Utiashvili, an official with Georgia's Interior Ministry, estimates that Russia financed 95 percent of the separatists' budget in 2007.

"They have no economy whatsoever, and they never had any economy," he said. "There is no way it can be a viable entity."

Inal Pliev, a spokesman for the South Ossetian government, said there were some working factories that should allow South Ossetians to produce goods for export. He listed a few slowly, as if counting them on his fingers.

Lincoln Mitchell, an assistant professor of international politics at Columbia University, said South Ossetia could not function without Russian support.

“It’s a poor, rural place,” Mr. Mitchell said. “If it were independent, it would be a poor, rural place. It’s very hard to talk about Ossetian independence from Russia with a straight face.”

He said South Ossetia served a useful purpose for Russia, by destabilizing the Georgian economy and Mr. Saakashvili’s government.

“I don’t think anybody really cares a lot about the South Ossetian people,” he said. “This conflict was never about South Ossetia.”

But it would have been hard to persuade the residents of Tskhinvali of that this week, when the South Ossetian president, Eduard Kokoity, a former Soviet wrestling champion, triumphantly returned to a celebration in the city’s central square after a visit to Moscow, where he had pressed Russia to take his territory into the Russian fold.

The square telegraphs the city’s ordeal: the head has been neatly shot off a statue of Vasily Abayev, an ethnographer and local hero; a streetlight hangs cockeyed; a grand theater, gutted by fire, stands open to the sky; curtains wind around a tree branch on Stalin Street.

When Mr. Kokoity strode into the square, elderly men and women plucked at his sleeves, weeping, and whispered their gratitude in his ear. Women thrust babies at him to be kissed. He shouted out at the crowd, and they roared in answer.

“We will be a free people!” he said.