

Russian Spheres of Interest and the Question of Kyrgyzstan

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The war between Russia and Georgia in August of 2008 revealed many tensions between Russia and the west. One of the most significant of these issues was the Russian belief in “spheres of privileged interests.” According to this view, which Russian president Dmitri Medvedev [spelled out very clearly in September of 2008](#), because it is a major regional power, Russia should have special rights in its part of the world including much of the former Soviet Union. This was meant as both a post facto justification for Russia’s actions in the Georgia war as well as a statement about Russia’s intentions going forward. Russia, according to Medvedev, was going to reassert itself as the dominant power in the region, which was an implicit warning to the U.S. to tone down its involvement in the former Soviet Union.

Georgia, naturally, sharply disagreed with this view on the very reasonable grounds that as an independent country, they had the right to chart their own foreign policy and that they wanted to become closer to the U.S. and Europe. For Georgia accepting Russia’s sphere of privileged interest would have meant giving Moscow veto power over Georgian foreign policy. The notion of spheres of privileged interests for Russia was also clearly rejected by western powers who shared Georgia’s view, not only with regards to Georgia, but with regards to all countries. Critics of U.S. foreign policy have, not without reason, pointed out that the U.S. rejection of the spheres of privileged interests does not stop the U.S. from believing it has its own spheres of privileged interests, but that has not prevented the U.S. from strongly disagreeing with Russia on this.

Russia and the west continue to have different views on this question which has also remained at the heart of western support for Georgia. Recent events in Kyrgyzstan, a country firmly within the area of Russia’s perceived sphere of privileged interests, however, have made Russia’s demand for this right more difficult to take seriously. Russia’s failure to stop the recent violence and ethnic cleansing in Kyrgyzstan suggests that they only want the power that comes with interests, but not the responsibility.

The violence in Kyrgyzstan presented Russia a good opportunity to demonstrate that it could play a positive role in the region. The new Kyrgyz government was positively predisposed towards Russia and actually [sought Russia’s help in quelling the violence](#). Politically, this would have been a win for Russia, but they remained unwilling, or perhaps more accurately, unable to really solve the problem.

It would not have been easy for Russia to stop the ethnic violence which occurred in southern Kyrgyzstan. It would have probably required a commitment of resources and

troops as well as working with a range of political actors to find a political solution to the problem, but Russia had a lot to gain by doing this. Had they succeeded in this endeavor, or even made a good faith effort to attempt to do this, Russia would have been able to more plausibly present itself as a force for peace and conflict resolution in the region. American, Georgian and European resistance to the idea of a Russian sphere of privileged interests would have remained, but Russia would have been able to make its case much more strongly.

By failing to take a lead role in ending the violence, Russia only further demonstrated why its aspirations for privileged interests must not be recognized. If Russia, had been able to stop the violence quickly, and if Russia had believed, and acted upon the belief, that it was their responsibility to do that, it would have been possible to argue that while recognizing a Russian sphere of interests goes against certain principles, it can help bring stability to the region. Russia did not pursue this course, so this argument cannot be made.