



KOSOVO

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Kosovo redux

By George Jonas, National Post

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On Tuesday, the European Union's Javier Solana called upon Russia to do what the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) didn't do nine years ago: Respect another country's territorial integrity. Instead of replying: "We'll respect Georgia's territorial integrity as much as the Western powers respected Serbia's territorial integrity in 1999," the Russians responded politely. According to a news agency report, President Dmitry Medvedev "in a telephone conversation confirmed to Mr. Solana he has given the order to stop military operations."

This, if true, is good news for approximately 70,000 South Ossetians who live in the region that sits like the hump of a dromedary on the northern spine of Georgia, even if it can't do much for the thousand or two (reports vary) who have already lost their lives. Unfortunately, the news may not be true. "Despite the Russian President's claims earlier this morning that military operations against Georgia have been suspended, at this moment, Russian fighter jets are bombarding two Georgian villages outside South Ossetia," reported a Georgian government communique at noon.

What the governments of Russia and Georgia have in common is that one cannot believe a thing they say. In fairness, they resemble most governments in this, including the EU's, whose rotating President, Nicolas Sarkozy, has torn himself away from his busy schedule as France's President and Carla Bruni's husband to lend a hand to the peace process in Moscow if he can, and sample some caviar if he can't.

France's current relations with Russia are friendly. France opposes Georgia and Ukraine joining the EU at the present time, for which Mr. Sarkozy has been patted on the back at various diplomatic receptions by Czar Vladimir, a. k. a. Prime Minister Putin, himself. Pleasant as this is, it doesn't guarantee much except a continuing supply of vodka and Caspian fish roe. But then, harsh word don't guarantee anything either. They may even sound faintly distasteful, as U. S. President George W. Bush's televised remark did from the White House: "Russia has invaded a sovereign neighbouring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its people. Such an action is unacceptable in the 21st century."

One wishes. The words lose much of their ring coming from a President who has just given despotic China the seal of good housekeeping by his benign presence at the Olympics, and whose own country has bombed and invaded sovereign countries, not only potential threats like Iraq or Afghanistan, but countries that couldn't threaten America or its allies by any stretch of the imagination -- such, for instance, as Serbia.



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We're seeing a replay of Kosovo, except in a more dangerous setting. The role the late Slobodan Milosevic played nine years ago is assumed today by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, while Vladimir Putin is putting on the hat of British prime minister Tony Blair and U. S. President Bill Clinton.

Look at the parallels. The world community recognizes South Ossetia as being part of Georgia, just as it recognized Kosovo as being part of Serbia. The Ossetian majority in South Ossetia wants to secede from Georgia to become independent, or join North Ossetia (in other words, Russia) just as a majority in Kosovo wanted the break away from Serbia, as it eventually did, to become independent or join Muslim Albania. So far, the conflicts seem identical.

There's a difference between Milosevic and Saakashvili as human beings. The leader of Georgia is a democrat and a staunch ally of America, while the former Yugoslav/Serb leader was a communist-turned-chauvinist, a thug and no friend of the West. This is true and a sufficient reason to choose sides in a conflict, but not for describing identical conduct by incongruent words.

Will Saakashvili end up before an international tribunal as an accused war criminal for resisting the disintegration of his country by sending troops into rebellious South Ossetia? I doubt it. Should he? No, not if you ask me -- I'm just not sure why, if Milosevic did.

Is sending troops into South Ossetia to prevent its secession from Georgia, which is what Saakashvili did, different from sending troops into Kosovo to prevent its secession from Serbia, which is what Milosevic tried to do? Why? And how does bombing Georgia to get rid of Saakashvili's troops in South Ossetia, as Putin has been doing, differ from bombing Serbia, as NATO did between March and June in 1999, to get rid ofw Milosevic's troops in Kosovo?

To prevent the ethnic cleansings of Albanians in Kosovo, NATO presided over the ethnic cleansing of the Serbs. Is Putin to be condemned for preventing Georgia from defending its territorial integrity when Clinton and Blair escape censure for preventing Serbia's defence of its territorial integrity? Again, why? They're either both war crimes or neither is.

When Hitler dismembered Czechoslovakia in 1938, an act subsequently treated as a war crime at the Nuremberg Trials, in addition to his own ambitions, he was responding to the desire of the ethnic German inhabitants of the Sudetenland to unite their region with the German Reich. It may have been a war crime all right, but it was also an attempt to give effect to the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination. Putin seems ready to pull a Sudetenland in Georgia. I'm afraid NATO may have empowered him by pulling one in 1999 in Kosovo.