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The recognition game

Ian Bancroft, The Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/28/georgia.russia>

"History will judge!" were the bullish words of Bernard Kouchner, the French foreign minister, in response to Konstantin Kosachev, president of the Russian Duma foreign affairs committee, who warned that "You are absolutely wrong on Kosovo. It is a terrible precedent", during a press conference earlier this year following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. With Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian president, signing a decree on the independence of Georgia's break-away provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the judgments of history are likely to be delivered far sooner than Kouchner and others expected.

By relying upon reiterations of "uniqueness" to justify their recognition of Kosovo's independence, the US and a majority of EU member states have ensured that appeals to respect the territorial integrity of Georgia sound both hollow and hypocritical, particularly President Bush's insistence that "Georgia's territorial integrity and borders must command the same respect as every other nation's, including Russia's". An international system defined by such arbitrary reiterations of "uniqueness", as opposed to universal principles, is always going to be vulnerable to contrived acts of imitation. The miscalculation of Kosovo is now, with conscious Russian assistance, recoiling back onto its instigators.

In collapsing the distinction between international law and politics, those who supported Kosovo's independence have opened up a Pandora's box of mutual recognitions and assertions of sovereignty, with damaging repercussions for both regional and global security. By discarding the ideas of compromise, accommodation and reintegration, support for dividing Serbia as a solution to ethno-national conflicts was both myopic and ill-conceived. Further reiterations of the inevitability of, and lack of alternatives to, independence for Kosovo constrained discussion over the possibility and nature of other potential solutions, including innovations in sovereignty and autonomy in line with UN security council resolution 1244.

The new recognition game of international politics is unlikely to end here, with the aspirations of local ethnic majorities elsewhere fuelled by the Kosovo case. Secessionist movements within and beyond the EU's borders continue to insist that Kosovo is a model for their own respective causes. In the former Soviet Union, for instance, Armenian and Azerbaijani forces have clashed over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, whilst the Moldovan province of Trans-Dniester continues to seek recognition as an independent state.



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Kouchner's assertion that "when two communities cannot speak to each other, but they only speak through arms, there is no choice but to separate them" is not only blind to Europe's very own history, principles and practices, but also to efforts to build peaceful co-existence throughout the western Balkans. The recognition of Kosovo's independence has contributed to the further erosion of two of the fundamental pillars of the international system – sovereign equality and the principle of the inviolability of borders.

The resulting recognition games and "parades of sovereignty" will have a number of destabilising effects throughout the world. Only through a UN framework and respect for international law can progress be made towards a model of multilateral governance to contend with the challenges of the 21st century.