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The Kosovo precedent

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It had long been foreseen that the major Western powers' decision to recognise Kosovo as a state would eventually be cited as a precedent that other secessionist regions, particularly Georgia's two breakaway provinces. And that has proved the case rather earlier than most expected, with the fast defrosting of Georgia's frozen conflicts.

Almost everyone is invoking Kosovo to justify their positions, including the five EU countries that have so far refused to recognise Kosovo. They will not, they say, recognise the two Caucasian republics exactly because they want to stick to international law, just as they did over Kosovo.

The exceptions are the leaders of the major Western countries, who have explicitly rejected any Kosovo parallels, describing Kosovo time and time again as a special case that cannot justify – either legally, or politically – any other secession. But, on occasion, even they have not seemed entirely convinced of their position. The two cases are completely different, French President Nicolas Sarkozy reasserted last week. But does he truly think so? “I reminded Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that when Europe recognised Kosovo, Russia condemned Europe's decision. Russia should not therefore be surprised that we are condemning its decision now,” he said. Kosovo, it seems, is playing on everyone's minds.

The Russian case

At the most basic level, politicians from Russia and Georgia's breakaway territories predictably argue that if Kosovo could break away to become an independent state, so can Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In May, Sergei Bagapsh, the president of Abkhazia, told Spain's *El País* newspaper, that his country would eventually achieve international recognition of its independence, just as Kosovo has done. Early last week, Bagapsh told a group of international journalists that the recognition of Kosovo had sped matters up and “strengthened our conviction that we would achieve what we strove for”.

His South Ossetian counterpart, Eduard Kokoity, has presented a somewhat more convoluted argument. In an interview with the Serbian daily *Vecernje novosti* 10 days ago, he said it was “incorrect” to compare his republic and Kosovo, as the Kosovo Albanians got their independence after “NATO aggression”. Unlike Georgia, Serbia was a well-ordered country that made a normal life possible for its minorities. “The



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Americans and NATO members took away [Kosovo] from Serbia,” he argued. “I sincerely sympathise with the Serbian people.”

Kokoity's argument goes farther than Russia's own line. Indeed, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has occasionally seemed a little irritated by the frequent comparisons between Kosovo and the two Georgian breakaway regions. Both Belgrade and Tbilisi bear responsibility for starting the conflicts with their own minorities, Lavrov has argued, but the two cases are otherwise quite different. While the conflict over Kosovo was stopped by “inhumane” bombardment of Belgrade by NATO, the Russians did not punish Tbilisi when they sought to evict Georgian forces from South Ossetia. Furthermore, Belgrade never sought to undermine negotiating mechanisms after the 1999 NATO intervention, he said, trying to set up a contrast with the Georgian president, who had, he asserted, rejected political processes and sought a military solution.

On occasion, Russia has reached for Balkan references beyond Kosovo. “What did [the Georgians] expect?” Russia's ambassador to the UN in New York, Vitaly Churkin, said as he explained Russia's reaction to Georgia's intervention in South Ossetia to his fellow Security Council members. “That our peacekeepers would flee, as [...] some peacekeepers [did] in Srebrenica?”

That is not a statement that all Serbs would appreciate: after all, many Serbs continue to believe there were no massacres by Bosnian Serbs at Srebrenica. And that is not the only Russian response that makes uncomfortable reading for Serbs. In an interview with the Albanian daily ***Koha jone*** last week, Russia's ambassador to Albania, Aleksandr Prishchepov, hinted that what some in Belgrade have long feared may prove correct: Russian opposition to Kosovo's independence may not be as rock-solid as it has so far appeared to be. “In principle, we are not against the independence of Kosovo, and have not ruled against it,” Prishchepov said. “However, for the time being, we do not recognise Kosovo.”

Quiet on the Balkan frontlines

In the Balkans itself, the positions adopted on Kosovo's status as an example have been predictable. They have also been presented in a refreshingly calm manner – after all, the attitude seems to be, these are other people's problems.

Which is not to say that leaders in the region have failed to produce a few perfectly unnecessary statements.

The government of Kosovo itself, for example, could not agree more with the Western powers that the case for Kosovar statehood is utterly different from South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's. Pristina then found it necessary to promptly reassure the unworried international community that it would not be recognising the two



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Caucasian republics. (For their part, the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have said they will not recognise Kosovo either.)

Unsurprisingly, the responses of Serbs – particularly the leaders of Kosovo and Bosnia – have mostly been in the ‘we-told-you-so’ mode. While the government in Belgrade has verbally been rather reserved, making it clear that recognition of Georgia's breakaway regions is not on Belgrade's agenda, it has shown fresh determination to persuade the UN General Assembly to ask the International Court of Justice in The Hague to examine the legality of Kosovo's independence.

If Kosovo inspired, or is alleged to have inspired, the new dynamics in the Caucasus, will the events in and Georgia's two breakaway provinces in turn reinvigorate secessionist fervour in the Balkans? One Balkan politician who in recent years has rarely passed up an opportunity to play on the threat of secession seems to think so. Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia has created “a new reality”, says Milorad Dodik, the prime minister of Republika Srpska, the autonomous Bosnian Serb-dominated region of Bosnia. “There is an essential link between Kosovo and these two regions,” Dodik has said. “Many regions will now follow the example of how it was in Georgia.”

But Dodik has also made it clear that Republika Srpska will not be one of the ‘many’, repeating his earlier position that Serb-majority entity will only consider breaking away if the situation in Bosnia became unbearable for the Serbs.

As could have been expected, politicians and commentators from Bosnia's largest community, the Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), take a different view. They argue that Dodik and Belgrade will soon cite both Kosovo and the Caucasus as an excuse to detach Republika Srpska from Bosnia. Many go farther, predicting now – as they have long foreseen – a big-power trade-off that would see Serbia and Russia eventually accept Kosovo's independence in return for statehood for Republika Srpska, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There is, however, very little to suggest the existence of such a plan.

There is no doubt that many ethnic Serbs would like to see Republika Srpska break away and possibly join Serbia in a single state. But there is also a broad understanding in both Belgrade and Banja Luka, the Bosnian Serb capital, that this is not really a practical possibility given the level and nature of international involvement in Bosnia. Moreover, the Bosnian Serbs are not inherently unhappy with their position inside Bosnia – as long as they believe the existence of Republika Srpska is not under immediate threat. Second, it would take much more than mere frustration over Kosovo to mobilise mass support in Serbia for such a plan.

Most importantly, any such move would clash with Serbia's top priority to join the EU. There is precious little to suggest that Belgrade would be prepared to risk this goal.



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