



# **KOSOVO**

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## **No easy answers to the status of Ossetia,**

### **Abkhazia and others**

By Richard Corbett, EU Observer  
<http://euobserver.com/9/26983>

The collapse last week (on the first day!) of EU backed peace talks between Georgia and Russia to resolve the crisis in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with the sides unable to enter the same room, serves merely to illustrate that there are no easy answers to the question of the status of Ossetia, Abkhazia, and indeed many other territories in the world.

Ever since US President Woodrow Wilson's 14 points, borne out of the wreckage left by the First World War, the self-determination of peoples has featured as a principle of international affairs. But less clear is the definition of who has the right to self-determination.

When Yugoslavia broke up, the international community was willing to recognise the right of its internal units that had the status of republics (such as Slovenia and Croatia) to declare themselves independent, but not to recognise such a right for those that had the status of provinces (namely Kosovo, despite its having a bigger and linguistically more distinct population than some of the republics).

Recently though, after lengthy deliberations, part of the international community has changed its mind and recognised Kosovo's independence.

When the Soviet Union broke up, the 15 internal units that had the status of Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) were recognised as sovereign states, but not the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR) or Autonomous Oblasts (AO).

Some of the SSRs (such as the Baltic republics) had previously existed as independent countries, but others were based on somewhat arbitrary boundaries, many of which were drawn up by Josef Stalin when he was commissar for nationalities.

Mr Stalin also determined the hierarchy of which groups were to have their own SSR, which an ASSR, and which merely to be an AO. This sometimes changed over time: the Karelo-Finnish SSR was downgraded in 1956 to the Karelian ASSR. Had this not happened, we would presumably now have an independent Karelia, possibly seeking unification with Finland.

A Transcaucasian SSR existed until 1936, when it was split into Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, the latter two including their own ASSRs and AOs. Would we now



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be defending the territorial integrity of Transcaucasia against Georgian demands for independence had the Soviet leader not re-designed the borders?

It is not surprising that the legacy of Mr Stalin's frontiers is now causing problems. The South Ossetians do not want to be part of Georgia and do not see why they cannot be independent.

Moreover, the Ossetians were bound to see Kosovan independence as a precedent. And if Serbia had sent its troops back into Kosovo in August, the Western countries with troops there would certainly have reacted, as Russia did when the Georgians sent their troops into Ossetia - but hopefully not have over-reacted as the Russian's have done so brutally.

### Complex situation

The situation is highly complex. Georgia was wrong to attack Southern Ossetia, and Russia was wrong to have reacted unilaterally and so disproportionately.

Due recognition by the West of this complexity would go a long way to avoiding any continued flexing of muscles by Russia or other actors in the region. As would some more consistent thought on the principles at stake.

It is not as though these issues are new. When Ireland opted out of the UK, its right to do so was challenged by many in Britain. Many Irish then questioned the right of Northern Ireland to opt out of Ireland and many in Northern Ireland opposed the right of Fermanagh and Tyrone to opt out of Northern Ireland.

Divergent opinions on who or which unit has the right to self-determination are inevitable and inherent to such situations.

Indeed, the question of whether Kosovo and South Ossetia should be recognised as sovereign states is only the latest in a trend that has seen the number of sovereign countries in Europe more than double in the space of a century, with every possibility that this trend will continue.

Only 22 states in Europe prior to 1918

In the living memory of our most senior citizens, there were only 22 states in Europe prior to 1918 (and two of these by then, Albania and Norway, were only recently independent).

The break up of Austria-Hungary and the Tsarist empire at the end of the First World War saw this rise to 29, soon reaching 30 with the establishment of an independent Ireland.



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At the end of the Second World War, however, this fell to 28, with the disappearance of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania hardly compensated for by the creation of the German Democratic Republic. This figure remained stable during the entire Cold War period.

Since the end of the Cold War, the break-ups of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia saw this jump within a decade to 46.

Recognition of the independence of Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia would bring us to nearly 50 sovereign states on the territory of Europe. And, of course, some would argue that the independence of Flanders, Scotland, the Basque country, Catalonia and Corsica is not beyond the bounds of the possible.

Some of these would be strongly contested, others less so - but what are the criteria? Is it possible to have objective criteria? If so, who should define them? If not, should any group that so wishes be able to constitute its own state?

What about my constituency of Yorkshire (it's far bigger than Luxembourg!)? Should Gibraltar? What about the Channel Islands? How would Russia feel about applying the same principle they argue for South Ossetia to Chechnya or Northern Ossetia?

In any case, it is possible that a continent of 20 sovereign states in 1900 could swell to one with over 50 in the coming years. Most of them will be in the European Union, so fragmentation will have been balanced by a degree of integration. Indeed, it is this very integration that has made it plausible in some cases for smaller units to be viable states.

Arguing for independence within Europe sounds far less isolationist when you are simply making the case to upgrade your status rather than head off into the wilderness (although any area opting out of an existing EU country would require the agreement of all member states to become a separate member of the EU).

Nonetheless, a world fragmented into several hundred small countries along with just a handful of giants would not necessarily be a better place for smaller countries, nor in terms of achieving world level agreement on global issues - not least environmental concerns.

The proliferation of states could also produce an arms race as such countries seek to develop their own armies and defend themselves against real or imaginary threats from their neighbours. Much would depend on the multilateral frameworks created for integration and co-operation.

While the EU certainly remains relatively successful in balancing unity and diversity, most of the world does not.



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