

Kosovan independence could ignite new conflicts in territories of former Soviet Union

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Kosovo's February 17 declaration of independence, which was supported by the US and Western European countries such as Germany, France, Great Britain and Italy, threatens to inflame relations between former constituent nations of the Soviet Union.

A number of frozen conflicts from the 1990s—Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia in Georgia, Pridnestrovie in Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan—could once again ignite, resulting in military action with unforeseen consequences.

At the same time, Kosovo's independence cuts across the intended scenario of the transfer of power in the Kremlin to President Vladimir Putin's successor, Dmitry Medvedev. One of the essential elements of this transfer has been a relaxation of tensions with the West, against the background of Russia's growing role in international relations.

By condemning the separation of Kosovo from Serbia, Kremlin politicians have sharply narrowed the possibility of friendly gestures toward the West. One can assume their speeches will be dominated by nationalistic and militaristic rhetoric, proceeding from Putin's February 2007 Munich speech, disappointing Russian liberals who had hoped for a thaw in Russian-Western relations.

On February 18, the day after Kosovo's declaration of independence, the State Duma and Council of the Russian Federation passed a joint resolution stating that "the norms of international law have been trampled," and that "in fact, all the principles of the UN have been fully overturned."

Commenting on this statement, Sergei Mironov, the speaker of the Federation Council, added that Russia was obliged to review its attitude toward the unrecognized territories that declared independence following the fall of the Soviet Union, hinting that they might be officially recognized by Moscow.

The next wave of declarations from Russia came on February 22, after a rally the previous evening by 200,000 people in Belgrade ended with attacks on the American embassy.

Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's permanent representative to NATO, declared that "Russia does not exclude the possibility of intervening militarily in the region, if the actions of the European Union or NATO violate the resolution of the UN's Security Council on Kosovo." In addition, Rogozin suggested that the process of recognizing Kosovo's independence was financed by the local narco-mafia. These words evoked an official rebuke from Washington.

Russian President Putin also addressed the issue, choosing as a forum an informal summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Moscow, where, for the first time in recent years, the presidents of all twelve states of the Commonwealth have gathered. (This meeting included all the former republics of the USSR except for the Baltic countries. Press statements paid particular attention to the arrival in Moscow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and Turkmen president Gurbangula Berdimukhammedov).

At the meeting, Putin said: "The Kosovo precedent is a bad precedent. In essence, it breaks the entire system of international relations which has developed, not over decades, but over centuries. And, without any doubt, it can draw in its wake a chain of unpredictable consequences."

Putin added that the states that have recognized Kosovo's independence from Serbia have not considered the implications of their actions. "In the final analysis," he said, "this is a double-edged sword, which may come back to haunt them at some point."

Despite the legal justification for the objections of Russian leaders to the West's actions, Russia's position is deeply hypocritical.

Over the past several years, official Russian propaganda focused on criticizing conceptions of human rights and democratic freedoms. These have been declared the offspring of Western civilization and not applicable to Russia.

Kremlin propagandists have been advancing the ideas of imperial greatness and enlightened authoritarianism ("sovereign democracy"). In practice, this is expressed in the suppression of any opposition, the wide-scale falsification of elections, and measures to limit civil and political rights.

The very manner in which supreme power in the Kremlin is being transferred from Putin to Medvedev ignores elementary democratic procedures. The "successor" designated by Putin is elevated above all other nominal candidates for president.

In foreign policy, the Kremlin has added to its arsenal the notion of an "energy empire," whereby Moscow's needs are satisfied by means of economic pressure and blackmail. The gas disputes with Ukraine illustrate the real, rather than professed, methods and outlook of the Russian ruling elite.

Within this framework, the Kremlin's defense of the rights of unrecognized autonomous regions in the territories of Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan is based exclusively on the desire to maintain its own geopolitical interests. Moscow views the issue of the status and fate of these autonomous areas as small change in its dealings with neighboring states.

Under pressure from Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia—autonomous areas in which more than 80 percent of the populations have Russian passports—have not made any specific announcements about declaring their own independence in the wake of the Kosovo precedent. Instead, at the beginning of last week, the presidents of both autonomous areas expressed their intention in the near future to appeal to Russia, other countries of the CIS and the UN with a request to recognize their independence.

Speaking at a press conference in the Russian capital, the president of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, said Kosovo established a precedent and that one "cannot speak of the unique nature of Kosovo's case." The president of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoity, insisted that South Ossetia and Abkhazia had stronger political and legal grounds to have their independence recognized than Kosovo. He noted that the two regions of

Georgia declared their independence 17 years ago.

A number of experts have expressed doubts that Russia will decide to recognize the independence of these two autonomous areas. Izolda Kachmazova, the director of the Institute of Political Technologies in South Ossetia, told the correspondent of *Gazette*: “Even if the entire world recognizes Kosovo, Russia will not support us. We are merely small change in her hands for pressuring Georgia and the international community. When Tbilisi conducts negotiations with NATO, Russia will try through various political forces to restrain her from entering the Northern Atlantic alliance, promising, in exchange, us and Abkhazia.”

“I do not think that Moscow will recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” said the deputy director of the Moscow Center for Political Research, Aleksei Makarin. “In that case, Russia’s presence in international organizations would come into question. I think Moscow will simply strengthen some of its economic and cultural aid to these republics and leave it at that.”

Georgia was one of the countries of the CIS that refused to recognize Kosovo’s independence. The chairman of the Georgian parliamentary committee on foreign affairs, Konstantin Gabashvili, confirmed the position of his government on Kosovo, adding: “But this issue might be revisited if Russia, by resorting to precedent, takes definite steps to recognize the independence of separatist enclaves in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Pridnestrovie.”

After Saakashvili was re-elected president on 5 January of this year, the rhetoric of the Georgian leaders aimed at Russia softened significantly. Tbilisi began to speak of the irreversibility of cooperation with Moscow, of the need to relax visa requirements, of removing the wine embargo and of removing transport restrictions.

Russian demands toward Georgia were formulated by the head of the CIS countries within the Russian Foreign Ministry, Andrei Kelin. He told the newspaper *Kommersant* that “there is a set of concrete steps by which Georgia must show its readiness to normalize its relations with us.” Among these conditions: Georgian withdrawal of objections it filed with the World Trade Organization, the opening of a Russian school in Tbilisi, and, most importantly, legislation barring foreign military bases on Georgian territory.

Kelin said, “Our bases were removed from Georgia precisely on such promises, which have yet to be fulfilled. In the context of Georgia’s intention to enter NATO, therefore, it is extremely important to us that Georgia adopt a law about not admitting foreign troops.”

Moscow has adopted a no less pragmatic position with regard to Pridnestrovie. Russia is prepared to make significant concessions on the status of this territory and conclude the issue of its independence in return for preferential treatment in economic relations with Moldova and Moldovan support on the question of Kosovo.

Last week, Moldovan Prime Minister Vasilii Tarpaev visited Moscow. At a meeting with him the Russian premier, Viktor Zubkov, stated: “Russia supports the territorial integrity of Moldova, on whose territory the Pridnestrovie question has not been settled.”

At the meeting of the two premiers, agreement was reached that the Russian energy giant Gazprom would take part in exploration of Moldovan natural gas sites. Gazprom already has a 50 percent-plus-one share control of the company Moldovagaz and intends to increase its share to 80 percent. It is not excluded that the desired shares will be received in exchange for debt. At the present time, the debt of Kishinev and Tiraspol for gas supplied by Russia has reached almost \$2 billion.

Since November, Russia has relaxed the economic embargo against Moldova that was introduced in the spring of 2006. It had a palpable effect on Moldovan wine makers, who traditionally sold most of their product in Russia.

It seems that settlement of the Pridnestrovie problem will be based on the formula of 5+2: Moldova, Pridnestrovie, Russia, Ukraine and

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe intermediaries, plus observers from the United States and the European Union. Out of this process is expected to emerge a special status for Pridnestrovie that will preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova within its internationally recognized boundaries.

Moldova sharply condemned Kosovo’s declaration of independence. President Vladimir Voronin said his country “will never recognize Kosovo’s independence,” and official Kishinev circulated a statement that called the Kosovo precedent “a destabilizing factor in Europe” and “a dangerous stimulus for activating separatist moods in all the zones of conflict.”

Other countries of the CIS that spoke out against recognizing Kosovo were Azerbaijan, Belorussia, Kirgizia, Tazhikistan and Kazakhstan. For the time being Ukraine, Turkmenia and Uzbekistan have taken no position.

Nor has Armenia—clearly under pressure from Moscow—declared its position, although voices are being raised in favor of recognizing first Kosovo and then Karabakh. But if Armenia, which is highly dependent both economically and politically on Russia, made such a decision, it would push Azerbaijan away from Moscow, which, in turn, would lead to sharp changes in the entire configuration of political relations in the Caspian and Caucasian regions. It would also influence plans to build oil and gas pipelines, under conditions in which projects beneficial to Russia are competing with other projects more advantageous to the United States and Europe.

The silence of Ukraine over Kosovo is also understandable. It is facing escalating tensions with Russia over the transport of Russian gas to the West, as well as over its plans to enter NATO.

At a joint press conference in Moscow with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko on February 11, Putin issued an open threat about the possibility of a missile strike against the territory of Ukraine.

Putin declared that Russia would not intervene in Ukraine’s affairs, and that if the latter wanted to limit its sovereignty, that was its own business. However, he added, the perspective of NATO military bases appearing in Ukraine—for instance, in Sevastopol—would require that Russia take adequate countermeasures.

“It is terrible not only to say, but to even think,” said Putin, “that Russia would aim its missile systems at Ukraine in response.”

This unconcealed threat says much more about the real character of relations in post-Soviet territories than dozens of formal declarations of devotion to peace and neighborly relations.

Inter-state and ethnic wars that erupted on the territories of the former USSR in the 1990s cost, according to available data, several hundred thousand lives. Millions of people lost their homes or were forced to move.

The consequences of this destructive process have not yet been overcome, nor can they be overcome in the framework of the policies of capitalist reforms. These policies assign primary importance not to the objective needs of the people, nor to the goal of rationally organizing the economy in the interests of the majority, but serve only the satisfaction of the predatory appetites of the new ruling elites which arose as the inheritors of the old Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, and which are parasitically plundering the natural and economic resources of their respective countries.

Each of these ruling cliques tries in isolation to establish direct ties to the major powers of world imperialism and the leaders of the transnational corporations. They continue to make off with everything accumulated over decades of Soviet history, thereby destroying the remaining social gains and ruthlessly exploiting the working class and other layers of those working in their countries.

The efforts of the great powers to strengthen their influence on the territories of the former USSR, and the striving of Russia to recoup some

of its lost positions, threaten new and bloody conflicts.



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