
Russia and the Deadlock over Kosovo



Oksana Antonenko

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Summary

Russia and the West disagree over the future of Kosovo. While the European Union (EU) and United States (US) are keen to grant Kosovo *de jure* sovereignty under the Ahtisaari plan, Russia insists that no decision can be taken without Serbia's consent. Moreover, Russia insists that the Kosovo issue will set a precedent with long-term consequences for Eurasia and the world. These differences have exposed old divisions between Russia and the West, particularly acute during NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. However, today it is more difficult for the West to reach a compromise with an increasingly assertive and self-confident Russia which does not hesitate to oppose Western policies. This article looks at historic legacies, myths, concerns about precedents and other interests which guide Russia's policy over Kosovo's status.

Introduction

The Balkans are once more the center of tension between Russia and an uncharacteristically united Europe and America. The June 2007 G8 summit in Heiligendamm highlighted major and apparently irreconcilable differences. In 1999, NATO's unsanctioned military intervention to prevent genocide prompted suspension of Russia-NATO cooperation and put a new freeze in Russian-Western relations. This time Russia and the transatlantic community are engaged in a political battle over Kosovo's right to be granted sovereign statehood outside Serbian jurisdiction, with full rights to organize its own affairs. On perhaps the very last chapter of the protracted and bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, Russia and the West are as divided as ever; and for the West, compromise with a Russia which has grown much more confident and assertive under President Vladimir Putin remains elusive.

Europe and the United States have concluded that, after almost seven years of international administration under the auspices of the UN, Kosovo's identity as part of Serbia is unsustainable. Moreover, they believe that any delay in granting Kosovo at least partial sovereignty is a major obstacle for its development, stability and security. In their view, any attempt to postpone or deny Kosovo sovereignty could provoke violence and upset the fragile stability of the post-war Balkans. Many in Europe saw the former Yugoslavia as a test case for crisis management and nation building. They are determined to bring this dark legacy of the 1990s to a close and see the Balkans re-emerge from a decade of conflict as an important part of Europe and as a participant in European integration. Slovenia's EU membership has been a remarkable success, and the EU is now looking into integration of Croatia and has restarted talks with Serbia. EU officials believe that Serbia would more readily acquiesce to Kosovo independence if it would benefit its EU aspirations.

Russia, on the other hand, believes that granting Kosovo independence against Serbia's will, with no real guarantee of rights of the ethnic Serb community in Kosovo, would be counterproductive. According to Russians, any detachment of territory from Serbia without its explicit consent would set a dangerous precedent. Moscow asserts that a unilateral declaration of independence, or a UN resolution containing an ultimatum to Serbia—which Russia repeatedly promises to veto—would be clear violations of the UN Charter and the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. Moreover, Moscow claims that any attempt to grant Kosovo independent status before it complies with the standards outlined in Security Council Resolution 1244 could encourage further ethnic cleansing against Serbs in

Kosovo. Finally, Russia has warned that any decision on Kosovo would set a precedent which could encourage separatism in other parts of the world, including post-Soviet Eurasia.

Russian representatives at the UN have threatened to veto an EU-US resolution, developed by the UN Special Envoy and former Finnish President Marti Ahtisaari, granting Kosovo internationally supervised sovereignty. Richard Holbrooke, a key Democratic foreign-policy adviser, claims that "Kosovo is shaping up as the biggest international test yet of Vladimir Putin ... [and] a key test of Russia's relationship with the West".¹ Putin, in turn, has accused the West of attempting to ignore international law in claiming that the resolution of Kosovo's status is unique and would not set a precedent.² At the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm, Putin accused world leaders of imposing their will upon other countries. He asserted that any attempt to resolve the Kosovo issue without Serbia's consent contradicted legal and moral norms.³ Russia's determination to oppose what seems to be a Western consensus on the independence of Kosovo could be seen as an illustration of a new, more assertive Russia, ready to challenge and oppose Western projects, particularly if they touch upon sensitive issues such as sovereignty, military intervention or Russian domestic politics, including its new pan-Orthodox ambitions. Moscow's position on Kosovo is much more than a simple ploy to irritate the West; it is based on a complex set of interests and concerns—domestic, regional and global—which dominate the thinking of Russia's modern political elite.

¹ R. Holbrooke, "Russia's Test in Kosovo", *Washington Post*, 13 March 2007, <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/12/AR2007031200972.html>.

² N. Melikova, "Kreml'yu ne nravitsya unikalnost Kosovo", [The Kremlin does not Like the Uniqueness of Kosovo], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 31 January 2006, <www.ng.ru/politics/2006-01-31/2_kosovo.html>.

³ See "Putin: reshenie problem Kosovo dolzhno byt universalnym" [The Kosovo Solution Should Be Universal], RIA Novosti, 8 June 2007, <<http://rian.ru/world/europa/20070608/66931903.html>>.

The Burden of History

Russia's Balkan policy, including its present opposition to independence for Kosovo, is rooted in recent history. The bloody war in former Yugoslavia was the first test of Russia's post-Soviet diplomacy. Many Russians still see the Kremlin's weak stance—including former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's role in Serbia's capitulation—as one of the darkest chapters of Yeltsin's foreign policy.⁴ As early as 1999, Alexei Arbatov, a well-known foreign-policy expert and former Member of Parliament from the liberal Yabloko Party, wrote: "One of the most remarkable episodes of the Balkans saga was President Yeltsin's TV broadcast about 'excellently executed Russian policy during the crisis in Yugoslavia, which ended with Russia's participation in peacekeeping operation in Kosovo. This statement could have been made only in two cases: first, if the person making it lived in an imaginary world which has lost any connection with reality, or if the person considered his compatriots 'dear Russians', complete fools. It is open to discussion which of these two choices is the worse one."⁵

Serbia's defeat is seen by many as a Russian defeat as well,⁶ a perception that helps explain Russian sympathies toward former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic until his sudden death in 2006 while being tried by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague.

The response to violence and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the 1990s pushed Russia and the West to unprecedented levels of cooperation, but also provoked mistrust and zero-sum thinking. Almost a decade later, the mistrust has fuelled Moscow's antagonism toward Western policies in the Balkans, while the pragmatic interaction and political accord have been all but forgotten.

⁴ See, for example, interview with General Leonid Ivashov, "Kremlevskie intrigi vokrug Kosovo" [Kremlin's Intrigues around Kosovo], published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 mars 2003, <http://nvo.ng.ru/history/2003-04-18/1_ivashov.html>; "Reaktsya Rossii na vydachu Miloshevicha" [Russia's Reaction to Milosevic's Being Back in Court], report by the Research Institute of Social Systems, 3 July 2001, <<http://niiss.ru/yugo.shtml>>.

⁵ A. Arbatov, "Poslednyi Shans Rossii na Balkanakh" [Russia's Last Chance in the Balkans], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 July 1999.

⁶ R. Shamgunov, *Strany Kaspiiskogo regiona i vneshniya politika Rossiskoi imperii i Rossiskoi Federatsii (Uroki Istorii)* [Caspian Sea States and the Policy of Russian Empire and the Russian Federation: Historical Lessons], St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg State University, 2005, available at: <www.history.spb.ru/biblioth/novhist/mono/vinogr/85.htm>.

In the 1990s Russia was an active, and to a large extent constructive, member of the international community, acting in its capacity as a member of the UN Security Council as well as a member of the Contact Group. Russia helped negotiate the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and later played an important role in pressuring Milosevic to surrender in the face of NATO bombing in June 1999. Russia and NATO worked together in the Balkans, serving side by side for over five years. Russian troops made up some 1,200 of the 20,000 peacekeepers in the NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and some 3,150 of the more than 40,000 deployed in the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo and neighboring countries.⁷ In addition, a Russian general was based at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe and served as a special deputy to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, responsible for advising him on all matters concerning Russia's participation in SFOR, and later as a Ministry of Defense representative for Russian KFOR operations. These arrangements provided invaluable experience of interoperability as well as trust and mutual understanding.

However, few practical lessons were assimilated. Officers who served in the Balkans and tried to apply this experience when they returned home met little cooperation at the Ministry of Defense, and the majority soon retired. The key Russian representative at NATO, General Leonti P. Shevtsov, was sent from Defense to the Interior Ministry. The new minister of defense, Sergei Ivanov—now one of the leading candidates to succeed Putin—expressed his appreciation for the experience Russian forces had gained in cooperating with their NATO colleagues in the Balkans, and even suggested similar cooperation in regions such as Central Asia.⁸ No such cooperation has, however, taken place; it was in 2003, during Ivanov's term as defense minister, that the decision to pull Russian peacekeepers out of KFOR was adopted and implemented. Moreover, NATO's concept of humanitarian intervention in crisis management has been firmly rejected by Russian policymakers. Under Putin the emphasis has shifted even further toward safeguarding Russian sovereignty and opposing external interventions, unless sanctioned by the UN Security Council, where Russia has a veto. To be sure, Russia's experience of peacekeeping in the Balkans did help promote cooperation between Russia and NATO in the new Russian-NATO Council, created to replace the Russian-NATO Founding Act suspended at the time of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia.⁹ This cooperation included a special working group on peacekeeping which tried to develop common

⁷ NATO Office of Information and Press, "Russia and NATO: Partners in Peacekeeping", <www.nato.int/docu/presskit/010219/brocheng.pdf>.

⁸ Speech by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov at the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "Peacekeeping Missions of the Russian Federation—Experience, Lessons Learned, Future Perspectives, Including within the Framework of Cooperation with NATO or the EU", St. Petersburg, 25 May 2004, available in Russian at: <www.old.mil.ru/print/releases/2004/06/101109_6856.shtml>.

⁹ For more on NATO-Russian relations in the Balkans see Oksana Antonenko, "Russia, NATO and European Security after Kosovo", *Survival*, vol. 41, No. 4, Winter 1999, pp. 124-44.

approaches to peacekeeping doctrines.¹⁰ To many Russians, particularly among the political elite, NATO operations in the Balkans—lacking a UN mandate and outside NATO's immediate area of responsibility—were a watershed between the post-Gorbachev world and a new era of increasing Russian-Western rivalry. In the earlier era, Russia and the West acted jointly in solving global problems, while Russia now increasingly perceives NATO as a strategic challenge, or even a threat, and seeks to reassert itself as a distinct player in European and global affairs. In the eyes of many Western policymakers Russia's opposition to NATO's use of force against Serbia, its pre-emptive military deployment to Prishtina ahead of NATO troops, and its unwillingness to embrace humanitarian intervention were signs that post-Soviet Russia failed to fully embrace the West's values and share its key strategic interests. The first NATO campaign over Kosovo was the beginning of the end for the post-Cold War strategic partnership between Russia and the West. This campaign did more even than NATO's eastward enlargement to shape Russian perceptions of the Alliance.

Today many Russians see the resolution of Kosovo's status as an attempt by the West to prove the 1999 campaign was successful and legitimate.¹¹ Since Russia opposed the campaign, and continues to view it as illegitimate and wrong, it has no interest in legitimizing it now, when relations are tense over missile defense in Europe, NATO enlargement and the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty.

¹⁰ See, for example, A. Nikitin, "Partners in Peacekeeping", *NATO Review*, Winter 2004, <www.nato.int/docu/review/2004/issue4/english/special.html>.

¹¹ Igor Maksimychev, Institute of Europe Russian Academy of Sciences, is of the opinion that "the position of the West vis-à-vis Kosovo is motivated by the desire to support 'NATO's reputation'. It all boils down to NATO not wanting to embarrass itself and to avoid conceding that the intervention in the Kosovo conflict was in vain and the destruction endured by Serbia was unjustifiable. The idea of Kosovo's independence is therefore underpinned by NATO's desire to prove its rightness." The full article, only in Russian, is available at Golos Rossii [Voice of Russia], 21 June 2007, <www.ruvr.ru/main.php?lng=rus&q=34297&cid=16&p=21.06.2007>.

Lessons and Myths

Russia has drawn a number of important conclusions from the way the Balkan wars ended in 1999 which affect its position on the possible independence of Kosovo. Firstly, Russia, which has traditionally felt a close affinity with Orthodox Serbia and its people, does not believe Belgrade carried the bulk of responsibility for the conflict, and therefore sees both the NATO bombing and the political solutions imposed on the former Yugoslavia as unjust and anti-Serbian. Russia thus strongly opposes granting Kosovo independence, regardless of whether or not Kosovo has provided credible guarantees to Serbian minorities as mandated by Security Council Resolution 1244.

Secondly, NATO's decision to use force, despite opposition from Russia and without an explicit UN mandate, prompted Russian concerns about possible intervention in other regions, including areas of vital interest to Moscow. These concerns were reinforced by the intervention in Iraq. Moscow views a decision to grant Kosovo independence as a further erosion of the international legal order and a precedent for removing territory from sovereign state against its will and by means of an illegitimate military operation. Although Russia cannot challenge the outcome of the military campaign in Kosovo, it insists that a political solution to Kosovo's status must be agreed to by Serbia—which rejects the Ahtisaari plan.

Thirdly, many Russians perceive their government's involvement in negotiations with Belgrade at the time of NATO's campaign as a symbol of the weakness and humiliation of the late Yeltsin era.¹² The current uncompromising position in support of Serbia and in opposition to the United States and the EU, in contrast, is seen as an assertion of Russia's newly established "sovereign power" in international relations, and a *revanche* for the 1990s. Putin's reference at the G8 meeting to Western policies as "presenting ultimatums" and "humiliating" other nations is rooted in how he feels about the way the West treated Russia in the past.

There is a widely held view that Serbia is the last Russian ally in Europe, or at least in the post-socialist European camp. One Russian researcher recently wrote: "In the Balkans ... Moscow has betrayed the last

¹² Many argue that Chernomyrdin's agreement to support pressure on Milosevic came at a time when NATO was under pressure to suspend strikes and admit its defeat. There is still widespread speculation that Russia's agreement was linked to a \$400m loan from the IMF in June 1999. In this view Russia's "betrayal" of Serbia is synonymous with its weakness and dependency on the West. See, for example, "Razvorot nad Atlantikoy" [About-turn over the Atlantic], *Russian Journal*, 27 March 2006, <<http://subscribe.ru/archive/russ.politics/200603/27225409.html>>.

pro-Russian leader in Europe and gave him up to the US and its NATO allies. Russia was unable to defend its ally, although it spoke publicly about its intention to do so. The unjust nature of Western policies toward resolution of Kosovo issue, one-sided prosecution of Serbian leadership by "democratic" Western community is so obvious that Russia will need many years to prove that it is capable of defending its allies."¹³

Yet relations between Russia and Serbia can hardly be defined as resembling an "alliance". On the Kosovo issue, Serbia is determined to use Russia's opposition as a cover for its own inflexibility, but in strategic terms Belgrade does not see its future as a Russian ally in Europe, but as part of the EU, and even NATO. Economic and commercial ties are nevertheless expanding, a sign that the Kremlin favors these relations. Russia accounts for the greatest proportion of Serbia's imports, 16.1%, compared to 10.8% for the EU. Russia is also Serbia's largest export market. While the bulk of Russia's exports to Serbia are oil and gas, its non-commodities trade is increasing rapidly: the share of commodities decreased by 9% in January 2007 over January-February 2006, to 77.5%.¹⁴ Russian companies have taken an active role in the reconstruction of Serbia's electricity infrastructure, damaged in the NATO bombing campaign; many of the facilities were originally built in cooperation with the Soviet Union. However, many of these projects have been delayed due to unresolved debt agreements between Serbia and Russia, under which part of Russia's contribution is treated as part payment for Soviet Union's debts to Yugoslavia.

In strategic terms, the most important economic projects involving the two countries include a memorandum of understanding signed in 2006 between Serbiagas and Gazprom Export on construction of Gazprom's new pipeline, Blue Stream-2, through Serbia to supply gas from Russia to Turkey, Bulgaria, northern Italy and other parts of Europe. However, in June 2007 Gazprom and Italia's ENI signed an agreement to build a pipeline, South Stream, to take Russian gas under the Black Sea, through Bulgaria and Greece, to Italy.¹⁵ This agreement, seen as an alternative to the Blue Stream extension, does not directly include Serbia, although the Serbian government has expressed interest in taking part in the project. The South Stream pipeline, like Blue Stream-2, is a potential competitor to the Nabucco pipeline between Turkey and Austria which the EU sees as a means to get Caspian, and potentially Middle Eastern, gas to reduce dependency on Russia. The viability of this project is now in doubt after Putin concluded agreements with Austrian OMV in June 2007 which offer an alternative route for supplies of Russian gas into Europe. Gazprom has also announced, on several occasions, its interest in participating in reconstruction and privatization of a gas storage site (Banatsky Dvor) in Serbia. Other Russian companies such as Lukoil are interested in supplying oil to Serbia and in privatization of some Serbian facilities.

¹³ R. Shamgunov, *Strany Kaspiiskogo regiona, op.cit.* [6].

¹⁴ Paragraph data comes from: <<http://serbia.rustrade.org/economics/relations/info>>.

¹⁵ "Gazprom and Eni Plan European Pipeline", *International Herald Tribune*, 24 June 2007, <www.ihf.com/articles/2007/06/24/business/pipeline.php>.

Beyond any strategic connection is the idea that Russia has a special relationship with Serbia because of their shared Orthodox heritage. The Orthodox Church is indeed on the rise in Russia and commands increasing influence over the political process. However, the principle of common faith has not been applied consistently. Russia's relations with neighboring Georgia, also a strong Orthodox country, have been extremely tense following the imposition of Russian sanctions in 2006. Nor do opinion polls indicate that Russians see Serbia as a special case because of its cultural affinities. In 2004, one poll asked: "It is often asserted that Serbs and Russians have special fraternal ties. What is your personal attitude towards Serbian people—do you have special feelings to them or treat them as any other European country?" Only 18% answered that they had special sympathies; 69% view Serbs as any other European country.¹⁶

¹⁶ See the FOM: Public Opinion Foundation opinion poll, 1 April 2004, available in Russian at: <<http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/countries/serbia/d041309>>.

Bound by Precedent

Beyond historic legacies, Russia's policy on Kosovo is a function of its complex and often contradictory interests—domestic and regional—which would be affected by any decision on independence, particularly one taken and implemented without Serbian consent.

Moscow's policy over Kosovo is linked with its continuing concerns over Russia's own territorial integrity, although this has been somewhat less pronounced after Moscow reclaimed control over Chechnya under President Ramzan Kadyrov. In an interview before the G8 summit, Putin confirmed his view that independence for Kosovo could trigger negative developments within Russia itself. He drew parallels between the Kosovo situation and potential claims for independence on the part of Russia's North Caucasus republics.¹⁷ Russian officials have expressed concern that independence for Kosovo would be the first post-Soviet era precedent for a region—rather than a republic—to secede from a country, opening a Pandora's Box for smaller nations and regions to follow. Beyond simple fears over territorial integrity, Moscow's view is that that it would be unacceptable to ignore Serbia's position without setting a further precedent. International law, including the Helsinki Final Act, recognizes the inviolability of state borders. According to existing norms any secession has to be approved by the state from which a region is seceding. According to Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin, even if the UN resolution explicitly states that Kosovo does not constitute a precedent, it will be seen as such by separatists and will be used to support their causes.¹⁸

Russia therefore continues to insist on negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina and consistently opposes imposing any solution on Serbia. It is unclear how far Moscow is prepared to pressure Belgrade for a negotiated solution to avoid such a precedent. A number of meetings have taken place between Putin and Serbian leaders; Putin met with Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunitca the day after the G8 meeting. Putin is most likely only expressing support for Serbia's position rather than trying to

¹⁷ In an interview with journalists on 4 June 2007, Putin stated that: "We will find it difficult to explain to the small peoples of the North Caucasus why, in one part of Europe, some people are given this right, while here in the Caucasus they have no such right. Moreover, for example, some Ossetian people live in Russia, while others live on the territory of Georgia and consider themselves to be an independent state ... Why can the Albanians act this way, but Ossetians cannot? It is impossible to explain," www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/06/132365.shtml.

¹⁸ V. Churkin, "Kosovo mozhet stat argumentom dlya separatistov", [Kosovo Could Become an Argument for Separatists], 14 May 2007, available in Russian on the site of the Russian television channel *Vesti* <www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=121016&cid=5>.

pressure Belgrade to come up with a practical alternative to open-ended negotiations.¹⁹ It appears that Russian insistence on the continuation of negotiations is a way to preserve the status quo of de facto independence, while postponing formal legal resolution indefinitely. Such a situation is unacceptable for Kosovo, the EU or Serbia. The EU is increasing responsibility for the Balkans and contemplating further enlargement, and some in Serbia want to put their country on the path of integration with the EU (although those prepared to surrender Kosovo in exchange for long-term rapprochement with the EU are clearly in the minority).

Another precedent that Moscow fears would be granting Kosovo independence before it has fulfilled its commitments to guarantee security and to promote human rights for the Serbian minority, including the return of refugees, under Resolution 1244. Moscow argues that granting independence before these standards are met would reward ethnic cleansing, and could encourage similar refusals to honor commitments by other parties in conflicts in the Middle East or Eurasia. To underscore this concern, Moscow initiated a special fact-finding trip by ambassadors from Security Council member states to Kosovo and authorized a special report under the auspices of the UN to examine how Resolution 1244 was being implemented on the ground. The conclusions were obvious. The mission's report were crafted and broadcast in New York even before it arrived in Kosovo. It urged Kosovo Serb participation in elections, rejection of violence by leaders of all factions, condemnation of extremist and terrorist activities, promotion of interethnic reconciliation and implementation of Resolution 1244.²⁰ The report, however, had no impact on the position of the EU and the United States, because they accept that not all provisions of 1244 will be implemented. They believe that granting Kosovo "supervised independence" would be the best guarantee of stability and inter-ethnic peace, and that no such peace can be achieved before the status issue is resolved.

For Russian policymakers this is a step too far. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pointed out that the Security Council originally agreed on the principle of "standards before status". This was later revised, with Russian agreement, to "standards and status simultaneously", but now Russia is being asked to approve status before standards, with no prospect that these standards would in fact be implemented in the foreseeable future.²¹ Without such guarantees, such an endorsement would be seen by many Russian as yet another betrayal of Orthodox values—an endorsement of the destruction of Orthodox churches and monasteries across Kosovo and the persecution and expulsion of ethnic Serbs. It would

¹⁹ According to Vitaly Churkin, the Russian envoy to the UN, Russia is against setting any artificial time limits for the resolution of Kosovo status. See the site of the Russian radio station Golos Rossii [Voice of Russia], 21 June 2007, <www.ruvr.ru/main.php?lng=rus&q=34297&cid=16&p=21.06.2007>.

²⁰ S. Manuel, "The UN Security Council Visit to Kosovo", press release, UNMIK/FR/0046/01, 22 June 2001, <www.unmikonline.org/pub/features/fr046.html>.

²¹ Interview with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, *Der Spiegel*, "Everyone Ought to Stop Demonizing Russia", 7 February 2007, <www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,464531,00.html>.

contravene Putin's approach, which relies heavily on promoting Russia's role as de facto protector and champion of Orthodox values around the world.

There is, however, another form of a Kosovo precedent that Moscow might be tempted to use to its advantage. This involves independence claims by secessionist or de facto, unrecognized entities in the former Soviet Union, including South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova. At the G8 summit Putin repeated his previous assertion that universal principles should apply to granting any nation the right of self-determination, "be it in the Balkans or in the post-Soviet Caucasus ... I see no difference between [Kosovo] and [post-Soviet separatist states]. In both cases the current situation is a result of the collapse of the Communist Empires. In both cases we have inter-ethnic conflicts, in both cases, this conflict has long historic roots and in both cases crimes were committed. In both cases there are de facto independent quasi-state structures."²²

Moscow has long been supporting de facto states in Eurasia, offering them political backing by issuing Russian passports to the majority of residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, direct economic assistance, military assistance, and encouragement for their ambitions for independence.²³ Moscow insists on playing the role of mediator in these conflicts, although both Georgia and Moldova view Russia as a party to the conflict rather than an independent force. The United States and the EU, on the other hand, are strongly committed to supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova.

Russia's assertions that independence for Kosovo would set a precedent for Eurasian de facto states and legitimize their own claims to independence has been strongly rejected by the West, which argues that each conflict should be resolved on its own merit. It is difficult to see, however, how the Kosovo solution could be completely detached from the politics of secession in other parts of the world. In any case, the discussions over Kosovo have already raised expectations among secessionist regimes and made them less flexible in negotiations. Moreover, concerns over Kosovo have encouraged both Georgia and Moldova to accelerate efforts to restore territorial integrity, fearing a potential Russian response. Finally, even some Western officials, including EU foreign policy chief Xavier Solana, have acknowledged that Kosovo independence could complicate the resolution of Eurasian conflicts.²⁴ Speaking at the European Parliament, he said: "We are trapped here ... President Saakashvili is trapped, all of us are trapped in a double

²² RIA Novosti, 8 June 2007, <www.rian.ru/world/europa/20070608/66931903.html>.

²³ For more information on Russia's policy toward Abkhazia see O. Antonenko, "Frozen Uncertainty: Russia and the Conflict over Abkhazia", in B. Coppieters and R. Legvold (Eds.), *Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, p. 205-270.

²⁴ A. Lobjakas, "Georgia: Solana Fears Kosovo 'Precedent' for Abkhazia, South Ossetia", Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 4 October 2006, <www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/10/8748c1ca-a82c-444b-b2a9-df357251aa54.html>.

mechanism that may have good consequences for one, but not for the other. It may not be a win-win situation—although we should be able to look [for] and find a win-win solution. But it will not be easy.”²⁵

Although neither Putin nor the Foreign Ministry have officially declared Russia’s readiness to unilaterally recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this possibility cannot be ruled out should the United States and Europe unilaterally recognize Kosovo’s sovereignty in the face of Russian opposition. A number of politicians in Russia actively advocate unilateral recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria and view the Kosovo situation as a window of opportunity.²⁶ Although Russia and the West disagree about universality, it appears that any compromise which could cut the Gordian Knot of Kosovo’s status would have to involve a wider solution beyond Kosovo itself to both reassure Russia and provide new solutions to Eurasian conflicts.

Foreign-policy decision-making under Putin is extremely opaque and the president himself often makes key strategic decisions while the Foreign Ministry is kept out of the loop. However, on the issue of Kosovo the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ambassador Vitaly Churkin actively promote opposition to the Ahtasaari plan. The military, which still feels bruised after the NATO bombing campaign despite the now-infamous Russian dash to Prishtina airport at the time of KFOR deployment, also opposes cooperation with the West on this issue. The security services, which are now actively involved in decision-making in the Kremlin, oppose independence for Kosovo as well, arguing that it could become a center for drug trafficking and international crime, and possibly a safe haven for radical Islamic groups, affecting Russia’s own fight with radicalism in the North Caucasus.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See D. Trenin, “Kasus Kosovo” [The Case of Kosovo], *Pro et Contra*, No. 5-6 (34), 2006, p. 7, <www.carnegie.ru/ru/pubs/procontra/vol10num5-6-01.pdf>.

Future Prospects

Russia's policy on Kosovo is based for the most part on its wider interests, historic legacies and concerns about precedents rather than on concerns about Kosovo itself. Russia has played only a marginal role in Kosovo since its troops pulled out of KFOR, and it is not expected to play a stronger one in the future. The Ahtisaari plan, which involves a major role for the EU as a transitional administrator in Kosovo, gives none to Russia. In fact Moscow does not want to play any role there. Even the controversial and highly impractical suggestion for partition of Kosovo would be unlikely to compel Moscow to assume a greater practical commitment to safeguarding Serbia's interests. Moscow has assumed the role of a judge: a guarantor of international law, protector of human rights and commentator who bears no direct responsibility for the current and future situation on the ground. It is hard to see how Moscow could be convinced to surrender this position. Moreover, for Moscow the status of Kosovo has become a symbol and an instrument in its global and regional strategies, and it has little incentive to seek and reach a compromise with the West.

Russia's position seems unlikely to change even if Putin steps down in 2008. The two most likely successors to Putin are on record as opposing Kosovo independence. Dmitry Medvedev has said that the "Kosovo solution should take into account the views of all sides" and that "Europe is too small for conducting political experiments" of this kind.²⁷ Sergei Ivanov, too, has warned that it is unlikely that Russia and the West could reach a compromise on such important issues as Kosovo or missile defense in Eastern Europe.²⁸

It was naive of the Germans to think Putin's posturing on Kosovo was simply rhetorical and that his position could be changed at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm. The Kremlin's current frustration with Western policies and its determination to challenge the EU and the United States on all key decisions where Moscow holds leverage as a permanent Security Council member create an unfavorable background for compromise. If the West seeks compromise with Moscow, it should try to reach one a compromise with Serbia, using Belgrade's ambition for rapprochement with the EU as leverage. Neither the EU nor the United States have any such leverage on Russia which could help change its position.

²⁷ Available in Russian on the site of Golos Rossii [Voice of Russia], 20 June 2007, <www.ruvr.ru/main.php?lng=rus&q=34262&cid=16&p=20.06.2007>.

²⁸ « Ivanov ne verit v kompromiss po Kosovo i PRO » [Ivanov Does Not Believe in compromise on Kosovo and AMD], *Izvestiâ*, 6 June 2007, <www.izvestia.ru/news/news137856/>.

No direct trade-offs regarding the status of de facto post-Soviet states are possible. Regardless of any decision on Kosovo, however, Washington and Brussels agree that new impetus is needed to tackle conflicts in Eurasia and acknowledge that the status quo does not serve their strategic interests in the region. The determination of Kosovo's status, even if it is not recognized as a precedent by Europe and America, could nonetheless be a good opportunity for a comprehensive policy review and for developing new initiatives to deal with post-Soviet secessionist regions. Such an approach should, just like Kosovo, have all key players—Russia, Europe and the United States—at the table, all contributing their visions, resources and commitments. It is unclear how open Moscow would be to this idea, but Putin's repeated talk about universality could be used as opening for discussions not only on Kosovo, but also South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria.

There is no alternative to making a decision on Kosovo, however difficult and unpopular it is bound to be. Newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy's unexpected proposal of a six-month delay for a decision on status, to give Serbia and Kosovo time for fresh negotiations under a clearer deadline, has been greeted with skepticism in Europe—especially Germany—and Russia alike. Putin sees it as an attempt to whitewash what is in fact a predetermined decision on independence. Europe sees it as an unnecessary delay with little chance for Serbian agreement and a high chance of provoking violence in Kosovo.

If this potential compromise is rejected, Kosovo could unilaterally declare independence and be recognized by EU member states, the United States and probably many others. Moscow, however, is unlikely to follow suit, and may proceed to challenge its legitimacy, creating another source of contention with the West. Moreover, Kosovo independence, if not backed by the UN and hence not in full conformity with international law, would create many other problems for the EU, which would take over temporary administration of Kosovo after the UN ends its mission. As Sarkozy put it, "a Russian veto would tip Kosovo into an inextricable situation, with the EU split and doubts hanging over the legitimacy of its independence."²⁹ He also speculated that such a development could endanger the lives of NATO forces deployed in Kosovo since 1999. The stakes in the Balkans are as high as ever. Indeed, Russia's veto at the Security Council will deliver a blow not only to Kosovo's ambitions for independence, but also to the EU's ambition to develop a common foreign and security policy. Without an explicit UN mandate a number of EU states will be reluctant to grant Kosovo unilateral recognition.

Since Russia's position on Kosovo seems uncharacteristically firm, a unilateral decision on Kosovo appears the only way forward. Moscow is convinced that it holds the moral high ground and will live to see yet another Western "blunder", on par with Iraq and an increasingly unstable Afghanistan, for which Moscow will share no responsibility. If Russia is

²⁹ J. Dempsey, "G8 Fails to Agree on Kosovo", *International Herald Tribune*, 8 June 2007, <www.ihf.com/articles/2007/06/08/africa/kosovo.php>.

right, its policy is much more rational than the West gives it credit for. It is now up to Europe to prove that Kosovo will be an exception—that independence will bring stability and rule of law, not chaos and insecurity. If violence returns to Kosovo, Russia and the West will blame each other, worsening general relations. EU success in Kosovo, and closer ties with Serbia, could be the only way to remove the Balkans as a source of Russian-Western tension once and for all.