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Kosovo and the Caucasus

October 24, 2007, Vilnius

By approaching December 10th when Kosovo Albanian parliament is going to proclaim Kosovo independence with U.S. diplomatic support (unilateral recognition) with explanation that Kosovo case is unique in the World (i.e., it will be not repeated again) one can ask the question: is the problem of southern Serbian province of Kosovo really unique and surely unrepeatable in some other parts of the World as U.S. administration is trying to convince the rest of the international community?

Domino effect

Possible negative consequences of international recognition of Kosovo independence is going to be most visible probably in the Caucasus because of the very similar problems and situation in these two European regions. At the Caucasus (where 50 different nations are living) it is similar situation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia (parts of Georgia), but consequences could be felt and in Nagorno Karabakh (province in Azerbaijan) as well. The experts from German Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently expressed their fear that in the case of U.S. and EU unilateral recognition of Kosovo independence after December 10th the same unilateral diplomatic act could be implied by Moscow by recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a matter of diplomatic compensation and as result of domino effect in international relations. It is also known and from official OSCE sources that Russian delegates in this pan-European security organization are constantly warning the West that such scenario is quite possible, but with one peculiarity: recently they stopped to mention Russian recognition of Nagorno Karabakh's independence. It is most probably for the reason that Moscow does not want to spoil good relations with Azerbaijan – a country with huge reserves of natural gas and oil.

Why South Ossetia could be different?

On the first glance it can be said that Orthodox South Ossetians are equally separatist as Muslim Kosovo Albanians. However, South Ossetians are having sympathies towards Serbs (not because both of them are Orthodox) but not towards, as we could expect, separatist Kosovo Albanians. The real reason of such sympathies is similar legal state rights applied by both Serbs in Kosovo and South Ossetians – the only European nation in the Caucasus.

Historically, South Ossetia was never integral part of sovereign Georgian state, differently with Kosovo which was not only integral but culturally the most important part of medieval Serbian state till 1455. Moreover, Georgia itself was never before entered Russia united state territory, also differently to Serbia which lost independence in 1459 and regained it in 1804. Present day territory of Georgia entered Russia in parts – segment by segment. Ossetia as united territory (not divided into Northern and Southern as today) became voluntarily part of Russian Empire in 1774. The Russian Empress Catherin the Great, in order to be surely convinced that

Ossetians are really independent, before incorporation of this province sent a special commission which informed St. Petersburg that “Ossetians are free people subordinated to no one”.

Georgia itself became part of Russia in 1804 (27 years later then Ossetia). This fact is the most important argument used by South Ossetians in their dispute with Georgian authorities. Differently to Ossetians, Kosovo Albanians such argument do not have in relation to Serbs. Southern part of Ossetia was given to be administered by Georgia only in USSR by decision of three Georgian Communists – J. V. Stalin, Sergei Ordzonikidze and Avelj Enukindze. Between these two parts of Ossetia never was a border before 1994.

The people of South Ossetia on the referendum upon destiny of USSR on March 17, 1991 voted for existence of Soviet Union (like Serbs upon Yugoslavia, but and Kosovo Albanians on illegal referendum to become independent from Serbia like Georgians from USSR). The referendum on March 17, 1991 was organized two months after Georgian army started the war against South Ossetia in which till September of the same year 86 Ossetian villages have been burned. It is calculated that more than 1.000 Ossetians lost their lives and around 12.000 Ossetians emigrated from Southern to Northern Ossetia. This is the point of similarity with expelled 250.000 Serbs from Kosovo by Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army after NATO peace-keeping troops entered this province in June 1999.

Independence of Republic of South Ossetia was proclaimed on May 29, 1992. However, this legal act has not been understood as “separatist” because at that time Georgia was not recognized by no one state in the world as independent one and Georgia was not a member of United Nation. Oppositely to South Ossetian case, if Kosovo Albanians would proclaim independence on December 10, 2007, such act can not be treated by international community as a legal one (without permission by Belgrade) as Kosovo by international law and agreements is integral part of Serbia and Serbia (differently from Georgia in May 1992) is internationally recognized independent state and a member of United Nations. This is a common point of similarity between Ossetians and Serbs: both of them are fighting against separation of one part of national body and land from the motherland.

International system of governing and separation

The main argument for the western politicians upon Kosovo independence, as “unique case” of Kosovo situation, is the fact that according to “Kumanovo agreement” between Miloshevic’s Serbia and NATO on June 10, 1999, and UN Resolutions 1244 (following this agreement), Kosovo is put under UN protectorate with imposed international system of governing and security. However, such “argument” does not work in the case of South Ossetia as Ossetians are governing their land by themselves and much more successfully in comparison with internationally protected Kosovo. It was quite visible in March 2004 when international organizations and military troops could not protect ethnic Serbs in Kosovo from violent attacks organized by local Albanians when during three days (March 17-19) 4,000 Serbs exiled, more than 800 Serbian houses are set on fire and 35 destroyed or severely damaged Serbian Orthodox churches and cultural monuments. The “March Pogrom” revealed the real situation in the region. The position of South Ossetians in independent Georgia could be compared with position of Serbs in Kosovo after recognition of Kosovo independence. Differently with Kosovo case after 1999, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and even Pridnjestrovlje showed much more political-legal bases to be recognized as independent as they showed real ability to govern themselves by only themselves but not by international organizations as in the case of Kosovo. They also proved much more democracy and respect for human and minority rights in comparison with Albanian-ruled Kosovo.

Nagorno Karabakh and Kosovo

There are several similarities but also and dissimilarities between conflicts upon Nagorno Karabakh and Kosovo. In both cases the international community is dealing with autonomy of compact national minority who is making a majority on the land in question and having its own national independent state out of this territory. Both

Nagorno Karabakh Armenians and Kosovo Albanians do not want to accept any other solution except separation and internationally recognized independence.

Both conflicts are in fact continuations of old historic struggles between two different civilizations: Muslim Turkish and Christian Byzantine. In both conflicts the international organizations are included as the mediators. Some of them are the same-France, USA and Russia as members of both Contact Group for ex-Yugoslavia and Minsk Group under OSCE umbrella for Azerbaijan. Both and Serbia and Azerbaijan are against that their cases (Kosovo and Nagorno Karabakh) would be proclaimed as “unique” cases as it would be a green light to Albanian and Armenian separatists to secede their territories from Serbia and Azerbaijan without permission given by Belgrade and Baku.

However, there are and significant differences between Kosovo and Nagorno Karabakh cases. Firstly, Kosovo is internal conflict within Serbia (which is after 1999 internationalized) but in the case of Nagorno Karabakh we have to speak about external military aggression (by Armenia). Secondly, in difference to Armenia in relation to Nagorno Karabakh, Albania never accepted any legal act in which Kosovo was called as integral part of state territory of Albania (with historical exception during the Second World War when Kosovo, Eastern Montenegro and Western Macedonia have been included into Mussolini’s the so-called “Greater Albania”). Delegation from Albania does not take any participation in the talks and current negotiations upon the “final” status of Kosovo, while Armenia has official status of “interested side” in the conflict concerning Nagorno Karabakh. However, the Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh such status still did not obtain. Regular army of Albania never was involved in Kosovo conflict, while Armenian army (from the state of Armenia) was directly involved in military operations in Nagorno Karabakh, officially part of independent state of Azerbaijan. As result, Armenia occupied 1/5 of Azerbaijan territory and the victims of ethnic cleansing are only Azerbaijani. Differently from Kosovo case, weaker Azerbaijan side did not apply to NATO for the military help but weaker Albanian side did it during the Kosovo conflict.

Finally, it can be concluded that Kosovo independence would not be “unique” case in the world without direct consequences to similar separatist cases following the “domino effect”. That is the real reason why government of Cyprus is not supporting “Kosovo Albanian rights to self-determination” as the next “unique” case can be easily northern (Turkish) part of Cyprus which is by the way recognized by Republic of Turkey and under Ankara’s protection.

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