Conflict Studies Research Centre

Kosovo's Status: Russian Policy on Unrecognised States

Dr Mark Smith

January 2006

Russian Series 06/01

Kosovo's Status: Russian Policy on Unrecognised States

Dr Mark Smith

Key Points

* Russia's preference for Kosovo's final status is that of "more than autonomy, less than independence".

* However Moscow realises that it may have to accept conditional independence as the Western members of the Contact Group do not oppose such an outcome.

* Some elements in the Russian foreign policy establishment have drawn a parallel between Kosovo and possible independence for Transdnestr, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh. This has also been hinted at by Putin. The western powers reject his parallel.

* Such moves could be a mixed blessing for Moscow, as it would strengthen the case for independence, which could spread to other parts of the Northern Caucasus. North Ossetia could be tempted by an example of an independent South Ossetia.

* Independence from Serbia is a possible option for Kosovo, as this territory has been occupied and effectively controlled by western powers since 1999. Russia has not exercised a similar control in Transdnestr, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh, which would make it more difficult for these states to emulate possible Kosovan independence.

Kosovo's Status: Russian Policy on Unrecognised States

Dr Mark Smith

In October 2005, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that talks on the final status of Kosovo would start soon. He appointed former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari to lead the negotiation process. He stated that independence and autonomy are among the options for Kosovo and hoped that the negotiation process would take about 12 months. These are some of the key principles which will guide talks:

- No partition of Kosovo
- No return of the situation before March 1999
- No union of Kosovo with neighbouring states
- Protection of minorities.

The need to reach agreement on Kosovo's final status has exercised the minds of the Russian leadership, being one of the UN Contact Group on Kosovo. Moscow has been especially concerned about the possibility of Kosovo becoming an independent state, and this concern has heightened in 2005. The Russian view as officially stated in 2005 came down to two main points.

- An opposition to accelerating any talks on Kosovo's final status.
- Firm opposition to Kosovo becoming independent; it must remain part of Serbia-Montenegro.

In January 2005, the Russian Foreign Ministry warned against artificially accelerating talks on Kosovo's status, saying it was dangerous so to do. This was echoed by the chairman of the Duma international affairs committee Konstantin Kosachev in March 2005, when he stated that the situation in Kosovo is very complex and that he opposed any discussion of Kosovo's status in 2005.[1]

The opposition to discussion of the status of Kosovo stems from the fact that the Albanian community in Kosovo desires full independence, which is opposed by the Serb leadership in Belgrade. The Russian Federation, as Belgrade's main ally, has traditionally opposed former Yugoslavia's further dismemberment, not least because of the precedent it might set for separatism in the Northern Caucasus and possibly other parts of the Russian Federation.

In June 2005 Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Chizhov stated:

Kosovo's Status: Russian Policy on Unrecognised States
Conflict Studies Research Centre
ISBN 1-905058-51-9
January 2006

> No-one is saying that we need to make final decisions about the status of this territory now. This is the subject for quite long-lasting talks, which must involve all the interested parties, including Belgrade and the Kosovan Serbs. For us the important thing is that this process remains under the auspices and consistent monitoring of the UN Security Council.[2]

The desire to ensure that the settlement process remains in the hands of the international community is also a constant Russian refrain, echoing Russian calls made in relation to Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003, that decisions to use force should be made by the UN Security Council, and not by individual states (i.e. the USA and her allies). Moscow doubtless fears that Washington may emerge as the key player in any settlement process, which would then become a US-led process in which Russian interests could be marginalised.

The demand therefore that control of the settlement process remain in the hands of the international community has been a central feature of Russian thinking. Federation Council speaker Sergey Mironov stated at the beginning of November 2005 that:

> It is necessary to do everything there [i.e. in Kosovo] under the auspices of the UN. But because even representatives of this organization sometimes handle issues in a one-sided way, international attention is necessary here and it is mandatory to take into consideration the opinions of Serbia and Montenegro…The problem of Kosovo should be resolved through direct dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. However, once again we note that Kosovo should not be allowed to become a sovereign state.[3]

In November 2005, following UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's statement about starting talks on Kosovo's final status soon, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov visited Serbia-Montenegro. During this visit he commented extensively on the Kosovo settlement process, and interestingly, there were several ambiguities in his position, which implied the possible acceptance of independence as an option for Kosovo. There was no clear support for independence, which would be one of Moscow's less preferable options, but there was also no clear rejection of this option. Lavrov stated that:

> We also reaffirmed our support for a fair solution to the Kosovo problem on the basis of the international law and direct dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina within the decisions already taken by the UNSC and those which are now being considered additionally in connection with the opening of the talks on the future status of Kosovo.[4]

He also opposed the idea of a settlement being imposed on Kosovo. Advocacy of direct talks between Pristina and Belgrade would rule out independence, due to Belgrade's rejection of it, and Lavrov's preferred option is the one of "more than autonomy, but less than independence" offered by Belgrade. In August 2005, he outlined his opposition to Kosovo's independence in an interview in *Moskovskyie Novosti*:

> The independence of Kosovo which is being mooted by Albanian leaders in Kosovo today would have a negative impact on stability which is only beginning to be established in the Balkans. Attempts to proclaim the independence of Kosovo could stir up nationalist feelings in neighbouring

> countries, in Albania, Bosnia and Macedonia. Nationalist forces may try to play their game.[5]

However at the same time, Lavrov is aware that other powers in the Contact Group are not opposed to outright independence (subject to various conditions), and he does not envisage any break between Moscow and the other members of the Contact Group. When in Belgrade he commented:

> The governing principles that were approved by the Contact Group say that there may be practically any final decision on the status of Kosovo, but there are several restrictions, like the inadmissibility of dividing Kosovo or changing the borders of the states that are adjacent to Serbia and Montenegro. At any rate an agreement must be reached between Pristina and Belgrade.[6]

He therefore made no explicit rejection of independence as an option for Kosovo. The Russian leadership may be calculating that conditional independence is inevitable, if the major western powers in the Contact Group do not oppose it, and that Belgrade will ultimately have to comply, particularly if Serbia desires EU and NATO membership, and that it makes no sense for Moscow to stand in the way of this process. Kosovan independence would probably involve a high degree of international supervision. It therefore makes sense for Moscow to become part of this process as the best means of having some influence in the future Kosovo.

Implications for the Unrecognised States in the Former Soviet Union

The governments of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdnestr have sought to break away from the control of the central authorities, whose sovereignty over these regions is recognised in international law. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, they were reluctant to be part of Moldova (in the case of Transdnestr), or Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and sought independence, which led to armed struggles as the central governments sought to suppress the separatists' aspirations. Moscow has given support to the separatist leaderships, whilst at the same time attempting to mediate peace settlements. A ceasefire was reached in South Ossetia in June 1992, which was policed by a Russian-Ossetian-Georgian peacekeeping force. In July 1992 a ceasefire agreement was reached in Transdnestr, and a joint Russia-Moldovan-Transdnestrian peacekeeping force was deployed. A ceasefire was signed in the case of Abkhazia in July 1993, and a Russian-Georgian-Abkhaz peacekeeping force was established. However further fighting broke out, and the Georgian leadership asked for Russian assistance to end the conflict. In April 1994 all parties to the conflict signed a declaration on measures for a political settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which meant that Russian peacekeepers would be deployed on the internal Georgian-Abkhaz border. In May 1994, the Georgian and Abkhaz leaderships requested the deployment of CIS peacekeepers.[7]

In Nagorny Karabakh, Russia has again ostensibly supported the territorial status quo (i.e. that Nagorny Karabakh should remain part of Azerbaijan), but has unofficially leaned towards Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh in this dispute. The Nagorny Karabakh leadership declared itself independent in December 1991 and fought, with Armenian backing, to break free of Azeri control. Russia covertly transferred arms to Armenia in the early 1990s. In 1994 a ceasefire agreement was reached through Russian mediation. Since then the dispute remains deadlocked, with Nagorny Karabakh enjoying de facto independence. Russia is co-chairman

(with France and the USA) of the OSCE Minsk Group which is endeavouring (so far without success) to promote a settlement.

The ceasefire agreements have frozen rather than resolved these conflicts. There has been no breakthrough in settling these disputes, due to the inability of the parties to find a mutually acceptable division of power. This is largely because in reality none of the three separatist leaderships are likely to accept anything other than independence, something rejected by Moldova and Georgia. The separatist leaderships have been supported by Moscow, which at the same time affirms its support for the territorial integrity of these two states. The fact that residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been able to apply for Russian Federation citizenship (and large numbers have done so), has helped to weaken Tbilisi's control of these regions.

Some Russian circles see obvious parallels between the Kosovo situation and these unrecognised states. Such parallels are, however, less likely to be applied in these same circles to Chechnya, although they may well appeal to Chechen separatists. Linkage was made explicit by vice-speaker of the Duma Sergey Baburin in January 2005, when he stated that if Kosovo becomes independent, then the international community will be forced to permit Abkhazia to become independent.[8] He said this whilst visiting Abkhazia without a Georgian visa as an unofficial monitor of the Abkhaz presidential elections.

Baburin's comments caused a stir and did not reflect official Russian policy. As a member of the Rodina faction in the Duma, Baburin is representative of the nationalist lobby.[9] However, similar comments were made in March 2005 by the head of the Duma International Affairs Committee, Konstantin Kosachev, who also linked the Kosovo issue with those of Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He stated that:

> The future of other regions, which claim independence, in particular, Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia and Northern Cyprus will depend much on how the resolution of the problem on defining the status of Kosovo develops…There are many situations in contemporary Europe which await resolutions detached from the legal point of view, that manifest themselves as a principle of conflict resolution either in favour of the territorial integrity of the state, or in favour of the rights of nations to self-determination, and the Kosovo situation could become a precedent.[10]

This view has been echoed by the Abkhaz President Sergey Bagapsh, who in November 2005 also linked Abkhazia with Kosovo.[11] President Putin in November 2005 arguably gave implicit support to the notion that Kosovan independence, if it comes to pass, could be a model for others. When Serb President Boris Tadic, visiting Moscow in November 2005, he made the following comment on the possibility of Kosovan independence: "if the Albanians want to avail themselves of the opportunity for self-determination and the formation of an independent state, other parties must have the same rights."[12] Putin echoed Tadic's comments saying, "the principles must be the same for everyone".[13]

In theory, this argument could be applied to Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transdnestr and Nagorny Karabakh, though Western powers reject these arguments in relation to these territories. It is currently difficult to see them accepting a parallel with Kosovo on this issue. It has become possible for Kosovo to move towards

independence because it has effectively been completely controlled by western powers since 1999. Russia has not been able to exercise a similar control over Transdnestr, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If Russia was in a stronger position to guide any settlement process, then it might be more difficult for western powers to reject the "Kosovo model" (assuming Kosovo does become independent). An internationally guaranteed conditional independence for these states would have the advantage (for Moscow) of dismembering Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan. However such a conditional independence may also increase the influence of western powers over these new states. It could also stimulate separatist tendencies in the Northern Caucasus, and an independent South Ossetia may become an attractive model for North Ossetia. Independence could therefore be a mixed blessing for Moscow.

Endnotes

[1] BBC Monitoring 26 March 2005.
[2] BBC Monitoring 1 June 2005.
[3] BBC Monitoring 2 November 2005.
[4] Transcript of Remarks by Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov on the Results of Talks with Serbian President Boris Tadic, Belgrade, 7 November 2005. Russian Foreign Ministry website
http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/5b4785c1d5b40c01c32570b30056830e?OpenDocument
2327-08-11-2005
[5] Interview with Sergey Lavrov in Moskovskiye Novosti 26 August 2005
[6] Transcript of Remarks and Answers to Media Questions by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergei Lavrov on the Results of Talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia and Montenegro Vuk Draskovic, Belgrade, 7 November 2005
http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/2aa99bc9d5e18e93c32570b4002aa070?OpenDocument
[7] For accounts of Russian policy towards Moldova and Georgia over Abkhazia, see Dov Lynch, Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan, London, RIIA, 2000, and Nicole Jackson, Russian Foreign Policy and the CIS: Theories, debates and actions, London, Routledge, 2003.
[8] Kommersant 24 January 2005.
[9] Sergey Baburin was a member of the Rodina faction in the Duma led by Dmitry Rogozin. In June 2005 he was expelled from Rodina, and in July 2005 registered his own Duma faction, also called Rodina.
[10] http://www.eurasianhome.org/?/news/2005/03/22/08
[11] http://segodnia.ru/?part=news_print&id=8173
[12] Beginning of the Meeting with the President of Serbia, Boris Tadic 15 November 2005
http://president.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/11/15/2212_type82914_97205.shtml
[13] ibid.

Want to Know More ...?

See:

Dov Lynch, Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan, London, RIIA, 2000.

Nicole Jackson, Russian Foreign Policy and the CIS: Theories, debates and actions, London, Routledge, 2003.

Tracey German, Untangling the Karabakh Knot, CSRC 05/28, June 2005.

InternationalCrisisGroupReports (available at http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm)

Kosovo: Toward Final Status January 2005
Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transdniestria June 2004
Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia November 2004

Abkhazia UNOMIG Report
http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig/background.html

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the Author and not necessarily those of the UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-905058-51-9

Published By:

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

Conflict Studies Research Centre
Defence Academy of the UK
Watchfield
Swindon
SN6 8TS
England

Telephone: (44) 1793 788856
Fax: (44) 1793 788841
Email: csrc@da.mod.uk
http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc

ISBN 1-905058-51-9