

Regional Conflicts in the Western Balkans and the Caucasus Revisited: Comparison of Kosovo to South Ossetia and Abkhazia

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Abstract: One of the things that the Western Balkans and the Caucasus have in common is an extremely challenging legacy of the past. The dissolution of two multinational states – the Soviet Union and Socialist Yugoslavia in the beginning of 1990s – led to ethno-nationalist conflicts on a large scale. While the Yugoslav crisis ended in 1999 after the FRY was bombed by NATO during its Kosovo campaign, the Caucasus still remains a conflict-ridden region where Russian and Western influences keep colliding. The purpose of this article is to present an analytical comparison of the three respective regional conflicts – Kosovo, Georgia and South Ossetia – by enumerating and analyzing similarities and differences between them, as this proves to be one of current and more intriguing issues of the contemporary international political scene. The article aims at providing answers to two different issues: Did Kosovo's independence influence the establishment of a specific political pattern applicable to other disputed regions; and to what degree are the cases in question comparable to each other?

Keywords: Abkhazia, Comparison of Kosovo to South Ossetia/Abkhazia, Ethno-nationalist conflicts in South Ossetia/Abkhazia, Kosovo, NATO's intervention in Kosovo, South Ossetia, US Foreign Policy.

1. Introduction

When Kosovo declared independence in early 2008, the international community agreed that this event would have a major impact on modern international relations. While some spoke of the devastating effect Kosovo's newly acquired status would have on the existing international order, others rejected such claims as unfounded and backed independent status for Kosovo as the only viable solution. One question became central to the ongoing dispute: Would the independence of Kosovo result in a precedent applicable to other disputed regions?

At first it seemed that international relations would not be affected so deeply. However, the months following Kosovo's declared independence generated a new international political reality, especially in the context of the regional conflicts in the Caucasus. In the words of Schäffer: "Whether one supports the independence of Kosovo or not, it is undoubted that the declaration of

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independence had an impact on the Caucasus” (Schäffer 2009: 108). During the August war of 2008, when the Kremlin’s military might proved its effectiveness against the Georgian army in what began as a clash between the central Georgian government and the internationally unrecognized province of South Ossetia, an even broader division between those **pro et contra** independence was created. While Moscow, backed by very few on the international political scene, took the position of identifying the Georgian conflict with that of Kosovo in almost every aspect, Western liberal democracies rejected such claims as utterly unsubstantiated and inconsistent. Furthermore, when the Kremlin finally decided to recognize the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent at the end of August 2008, the Russian political elite presented its move as ‘Kosovo-inspired’. The West protested harshly and the gap remains wide even to this day. Thus, a second relevant issue emerged from the current ‘independence’ dispute: To what degree are the cases of Kosovo and South Ossetia/Abkhazia comparable?

The main purpose of this article is to provide an answer to these two crucial questions by comparing Kosovo to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and elaborate on the similarities and differences between these cases. The methodological approach used is directed towards examining four similarities and seven differences organized into two different sections. The comparison also deals with Kosovo’s independence and the possible creation of a specific political pattern said by some to set an unfortunate precedent for the future of modern international relations. The text also addresses a variety of different responses to the declarations of independence by both Kosovo and by the two provinces in the Caucasus, and hopefully providing an answer to some present dilemmas and disagreements over the connection between the cases. The final segment of the article presents a specific perspective on the impact the conflicts have had on current international relations.

2. Analysis: Kosovo vs. South Ossetia/Abkhazia

2.1 Similarities

The similarities between the respective conflicts can be summed up in the following categories:

1) Both Kosovo and S. Ossetian/Abkhazian conflicts represented ethno-territorial disputes where all the nationalities claimed to exercise historically ‘*more rights*’ than any other over the territory

in dispute. For the Serbs in Kosovo, after they acquired the province just before the First World War the Albanian population represented a foreign element, an ‘unwanted entity’ on ‘sacred Serbian ground.’² Thus relations between Serbs and Albanians, already suffering from serious “national traumas” (Lutovac 1997: 143-145), were damaged even more.³ As pointed out by Udovicki and Ridgeway in their book on Yugoslavia, neither Serbs nor Albanians “realized the extent to which their nationalisms mirrored each other: the knot tying the members of one group to Kosovo was the same one binding the members of the opposite group to it” (Udovicki, Ridgeway 2000: 317). The authors wrote that the Balkan Wars, and later on the First World War, resulted in the creation of a such a tense relationship between Serbs and Albanians that “only a wise, calm, and evenhanded policy on both sides” (Udovicki, Ridgeway 2000: 317) would be able to improve ethnic relations. After creation of a communist Yugoslavia in 1945, these national traumas were ‘frozen’ and forcefully pushed out of the agenda by the then communist authorities, which believed that this was the only mode of keeping a multinational state together. Communist policies failed to turn ethnic Albanians into Yugoslavs partly due to serious repression by the Serbian communist elite in the period of 1945–1966. Already alienated Kosovo Albanians were forcefully pushed aside, and even the 1974 Constitution that elevated provincial institutions in Kosovo to almost the same level as that of the six constituent republics and which was meant to decentralize power in Yugoslavia, simply paved the way towards future problems and certainly initiated the later development of rising Albanian nationalism that flourished during the late 1970s and 1980s. Finally, with Milosevic’s rise in the second half of the 1980s, the fate of Kosovo was sealed under the developing Serbian authoritarian regime. What followed was a decade of complete alienation of Albanians from the cultural, political and economic state structures, which led to open clashes between the guerilla UÇK and Serbian forces beginning in 1997.

A similar process took place in the USSR, where the Soviet communist authorities, in order to maintain order and organize a multinational state, successfully pursued a specific non-national agenda by making any political discourse on nationalist issues illegal (Zürcher 2007). In the case of Abkhazia, though it enjoyed autonomous rights under Soviet rule, the Abkhaz have always harbored grave mistrust towards Georgians and Tbilisi as the capital. Though the intelligentsia, various cultural nationalist movements, and even some communist Abkhaz officials made repeated demands for

² For historical data and other issues related to the Kosovo conflict see Isakovic 1999.

³ Issues of nationalism and the nationalist movements of both the Serbs and Albanians are described in Janjic 1995.

integration with the Russian Soviet Republic (these demands appeared in late 1950s and went on until the beginning of the conflict), the Soviet authorities always responded in the same manner, by making considerable concessions to the Abkhaz, and thus enabling them to exercise significant control over the economy and hold important positions within local government (Zürcher 2007). The Abkhaz were constantly pursuing the nationalist issue in the late Soviet era by charging that immigration from rural parts of Georgia before and after the Second World War had shifted the ethnic balance in the province. After mass Abkhaz demonstrations at Lykhny near Sukhumi in March 1989, when a specific declaration calling for establishment of the Abkhaz Republic was made (Kaufman 2001: 103), Georgian nationalist politicians and the Georgian public with a *quid pro quo* declaration of their own followed by their own protests. This was a prelude to later mass protests and the beginning of clashes between Tbilisi and Tshkinvali.

As for South Ossetia, in 1989 the Ossetian language was declared an official language in the province, and that year Ossetis appealed to both Georgian and Russian Communist leaders that the province be upgraded to the level of a Republic. The Georgian side, of course, rejected such demands and sought to restore full sovereignty over its territory. The tensions resulted in protests during November 1989 when more than 30,000 demonstrators took to the streets. Immediately after the first free elections in August 1990, South Ossetia declared itself a republic of the Soviet Union and again asked Moscow for political assistance (Suny 1994). The new Georgian government then imposed economic sanctions against South Ossetia, and Pandora's box was now wide open (Kaufman 2001). A series of clashes between Tbilisi and Tshkinvali began, the South Ossetian quest for independence was underway, leaving the central Georgian government in a constant battle for territory it considered its own.

2) The conflicts in Kosovo and Abkhazia in particular were predominantly influenced by major demographic shifts, while on the other hand all three conflicts produced further demographic shifts. As for Kosovo, demographic shifts were visible from the beginning of Ottoman rule onward, and well into the 20th century. The Serbian population left the territory for various reasons: the repressive measures of the Ottoman state, retaliation on the part of the Ottomans for Serbian participation in battles on side of the Habsburgs after their short invasions of the Balkans in the end of the 18th century; as a result of hostile actions by the local Ottoman and Muslim Albanian population; and in later times, economic migration to more developed parts of the

country, which actually became the most notable trend during the First and the Second Yugoslav states (Isakovic 1999). Moreover, the Albanian population in Kosovo had a much higher birth rate, which contributed to a significant increase in their numbers and a severe decrease on the Serbian side (Vickers 1998). The number of Serbs in Kosovo gradually declined, with Kosovo Albanians becoming a clear majority by second half of the 20th century.⁴

In Georgia on the other hand, the main demographic shift in Abkhazia took place during Soviet rule. Over the decades Georgian immigration from mostly rural and extremely poor parts of Georgia before and after the Second World War shifted the national balance and led to a rise in the share of the Georgian population in the territory of Abkhazia from 28 % in 1914 to over 45 % in 1989 (Zürcher 2007; Kaufman 2001). However, with the rise of nationalist agendas on both sides, and the beginning of conflict between them, the population figures have changed considerably. The majority of the Georgian population has by now left the territory due to clashes and ethnic cleansing.⁵

The population in South Ossetia, though the Ossetis were in the obvious majority at the beginning of 1990s – about 66.2 % of the total population of the province – undertook significant migration during the 1990s. Though some migrations had already taken place during the Soviet rule, it was the conflict with Tbilisi that led to migration on a larger scale (Kaufman 2001). In that respect, this conflict *shaped* migratory movements *more* than in the cases of Kosovo and Abkhazia, where significant migrations had taken place before the conflicts ever started.⁶

3) Furthermore, the **collapse of the two respective federal states** also helped generate the provincial conflicts in both Serbia and Georgia. **The dissolution of Yugoslavia and USSR** played a decisive role in start of both these conflicts. These two countries, which represented a very specific

⁴ For related figures and short and concise historical data see Jansen 1999.

⁵ For more information on related population figures see Statistical Yearbook of Georgia 2005: Population, table 2.1, p. 33, and also ICG Report 2006.

⁶ For related figures see Tsuladze, Maglaperidze, Vadachkoria 2002. Also, for birth-rate data, other population figures, structural peculiarities and employment issues for Georgia, see UNICEF Report prepared by Tsakadze 2003.

Note:* This report also states various respective figures concerning the population of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia (though the population census was not conducted by government in Tbilisi) mentioning them as ‘uncontrolled territories’ belonging **de jure to the Georgian state though not being under direct control of Tbilisi.

type of multinational state, existed mainly due to central authority's very powerful grip over the constituent republics. In the case of Yugoslavia, four elements signaled its political death:

1. The change in the political and economic environment in Europe which directed a change in US policy towards Yugoslavia⁷ (Yugoslavia ceased to be a 'symbol of differences within the communist world' and a strategic buffer for the US).
2. The transformation of the military environment in Eurasia, with the end of the Cold War which called for a complete restructuring of the US military posture towards Europe after the crumbling of the Soviet Union.
3. Internal political instability and a worsening internal economic situation.
4. The failure of Yugoslav leadership to keep the state together after Tito's death. The rise of nationalist sentiments following the downfall of the state both internally and internationally condemned it to destruction.

The decline of the USSR came to be associated with Gorbachev assuming office in 1985, though years of increasing economic crisis had already damaged the Soviet state. Moreover, Soviet interventions in nearby regions, along with constant confrontation with the US on the geo-political level, reduced Moscow's ability to sustain itself. Thus, the Soviet collapse left a window of opportunity to nations residing within the Soviet Union's borders to re-form their nation-states and regain independence.

Thus, both the Yugoslav and the Soviet states' collapse led to violence within those nations and in those regions where conflicts had existed before and were not properly and promptly

⁷ **Author's remark*: This, however, does not in any way imply that the US supported the dissolution of Yugoslavia; on the contrary, the US administration at the time made final efforts to save the dying state. For that matter, though the US gradually changed its 'special' attitude towards Yugoslavia back during the 1980s (from 1982 and NSDD 54, the US administration's policy towards Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe was aimed towards 'silent inner revolution' and reintroduction of these states into the western-led European community of nations), it supported Yugoslav territorial integrity up until the dissolution. However, Yugoslavia lost its geo-strategic importance for the US as the European environment went into transformation and major restructuring within the Soviet bloc. This meant that the US would pay more attention to the following issues: development of market economy, liberalization of the Yugoslav market, protection of human rights (especially in Kosovo), and antiterrorist activities. Warren Zimmermann, the last US ambassador to Yugoslavia, described the political situation in the decaying Yugoslav state in his book (Zimmermann 1999). The previously-mentioned NSDD 54 is available on-line at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-054.htm>. Lastly, for general historical developments and trends in the US foreign policy, see Kissinger 1994.

resolved, but 'frozen' and isolated instead. The main reason for this development is to be found in clashes between the nation and state building efforts of the newly formulated political centers (Belgrade on the one hand, and Tbilisi on the other) versus ethnic groups engaged in regional protests. Thus, it was quite common for both political centers to resort to the use of force in order to vigorously address protest on the periphery and keep the territory of their respective states together. The use of force by both political centers went hand in hand with rampant national ideologies, and in both cases, though many problems could have been dealt with in a peaceful manner, guns used were to silence such voices.

4) Lastly, the conflicts analyzed here were characterized by the **rise of specific ethno-nationalist ideologies promoted by charismatic and influential nationalist leaders** (Zürcher 2007). The rise of ethno-nationalist ideologies was seen in both Yugoslavia and USSR in late 1980s. The fact is that the respective nationalist agendas did have a certain, though not decisive, impact upon the internal political situation in both the USSR and Yugoslavia well before the 1980s, but they were dealt with in a manner typical of authoritarian regimes that repressed any and all nationalist claims for the sake of the federative state. Charismatic leaders in Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia largely directed the nationalist agenda towards independence as the ultimate goal of their respective movements.

In the case of Kosovo, as early as 1989 an organization called the Democratic League of Kosovo came into existence and immediately became very popular with the Albanian population, which saw it as an instrument against Serbian repression. Moreover, this was an explicit Albanian response to rising Serbian nationalism which developed steadily from the mid-1980s (influenced heavily by academic and political circles in Serbia). Thus, during the following years the DLK managed to create a shadow government (largely supported by the Albanian community abroad) and parallel social institutions in education and health services, while championing passive resistance to the Milosevic regime until 1997 when KLA began active guerilla warfare against Serbian security forces.

On the other hand, in the case of Georgia, leaders such as Gamsakhurdia, Kostava, Chanturia and Natadze, though they belonged to different and opposing nationalist movements, often met to discuss how to get the Georgian population into the streets as sign of rising nationalist sentiments. In response, both Abkhaz and South Ossets were also mobilized on nationalist grounds.

2.2 Differences

1) To begin with, the first point of difference lies in **the use of military force**. In the case of Serbia, the NATO coalition led by the US employed military force in 1999. The air campaign was designed to stabilize the regional situation by preventing a wider conflict⁸ by coercing the Serbian regime to stop its aggressive actions against Kosovo Albanians and withdraw its forces from the province.

The Russian military actions of August 2008 in Georgia, on the other hand, were specifically devised so as *not only to compel the invading Georgian Army to retreat*, but furthermore, *to protect Moscow's interests in the region* by confirming its tight hold on it (Nichol 2008b). This element reveals the major difference between the US actions in Kosovo and the Russian venture in Georgia, mainly due to the fact that Russian interests in the Caucasian region go beyond any proclaimed protection of the South Ossetian/Abkhaz, and well into cementing Russian dominance in the region. In the case of Kosovo, the stability of the whole Balkans, and with it a considerable part of Europe, was at stake in 1999, and the US surely had no intention of repeating the mistakes of the early and mid 1990s (many of which became identified as 'humanitarian' disasters) when the Yugoslav crisis befell a helpless Europe and dragged the whole region into a decade of chaos.

As for Georgia itself, it must be clearly said that Tbilisi is thought to have started the conflict, probably as a result of a rather mistaken analysis of the regional situation.⁹ However, I believe it is not greatly relevant to discuss the details of 'who fired the first shot' because, as I pointed out in the

⁸ Kosovo crisis and related international security issues have been addressed in Latawski, Smith 2003.

⁹ Friedman noted that "it is very difficult to imagine that the Georgians launched their attack against US wishes. The Georgians rely on the United States, and they were in no position to defy it. This leaves two possibilities. The first is a massive breakdown in intelligence, in which the United States was either unaware of the existence of Russian forces, or knew of the Russian forces but – along with the Georgians – miscalculated Russia's intentions. The second is that the United States, along with other countries, has viewed Russia through the prism of the 1990s, when the Russian military was in shambles and the Russian government was paralyzed. The United States has not seen beyond its borders since the Afghan war of the 1970s–1980s. The Russians had systematically avoided such moves for years. The United States had assumed that the Russians would not risk the consequences of an invasion... Militarily, there was no counter. Economically, Russia is an energy exporter doing quite well – indeed, the Europeans need Russian energy even more than the Russians need to sell it to them. Politically, as we shall see, the Americans needed the Russians more than the Russians needed the Americans. Moscow's calculus was that this was the moment to strike. The Russians had been building up to it for months, as we have discussed, and they struck" (Friedman 2008).

beginning, each side harbors serious reservations and grievances about the other, with misstatements and exaggeration being at the core of policies on both sides. It is now clear, nonetheless, that Tbilisi was the one that initiated the hostilities and ventured a military conflict that proved too much for its military capabilities. But on the other hand, it must be clearly stressed that *Moscow's actions surely went beyond those of a purely defensive war*. Ironically enough, both Tbilisi and Moscow claimed to have led an entirely defensive war, yet this is far from the truth. Paul Sanders, an expert on Russia and the director of the Nixon Center in Washington, D.C., described the Russian military actions as “disproportionate” (quoted in Spiegel International 2008), recognition of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as contrary to international law, and characterized the Russian engagement in Georgia as revival of its imperial appetite. However, he also added that Georgia had to bear certain responsibility for the conflict, and described Tbilisi as “not so much a victim as a willing participant” (quoted in Spiegel International 2008). Nevertheless, beyond any doubt Moscow was prepared to engage the Georgian Army, and was waiting for an opportune moment to do so. The speed and effectiveness of the Russian response cannot be attributed merely to the sheer strength and discipline of the Russian army, regardless of the fact that this army is well-prepared, properly equipped, and possessing considerable and well-trained human resources. What made the Russian forces' actions so highly effective was that Moscow's plan was executed precisely (King 2008b). Even if one points to the certainly enormous differences between the two states and their respective armies, it remains obvious that Moscow was waiting for the right moment when it could use Tbilisi's wrong moves and ‘seal the deal’ on the future of the two provinces.

2) Analysis of the use of military force is an indicative element pointing towards a second crucial difference in the comparison conducted here. This difference is embodied in the **nature** of specific **geo-political reasons** why the US acted using force against Serbia, and why this scenario would have never been possible in the case of Georgia. For that matter, while the Balkans represented an area of vital US interest in Europe,¹⁰ Georgia also had become an American lynchpin in the Caucasus region but, and this must be clearly emphasized, *also an important geo-political asset for Kremlin* (Schnabel, Thakur 2000). However, the difference is that Russian interests in the region are exclusively based on use of military power for *keeping the region under Moscow's control and influence* for purposes of

¹⁰ On various issues of importance for US Foreign Policy in the Balkans in terms of the Kosovo intervention see O'Hanlon, Haass, Daalder 1999; Mandelbaum 1999; Daalder, O'Hanlon 2000a; 2000b.

augmenting the Kremlin's grip over energy resources and their routes. Moreover, Russia is permanently interested in possibly *spreading its influence towards Middle East countries* and fending off Turkish influence in the Caucasus. It is important to note that *NATO's actions in the Balkans came to be seen as necessary for regional stability and security in Europe* (with no ulterior US motives of holding the region as a prime asset, as in the Russian case). US actions of this type would surely be almost impossible to imagine given the geo-political profile of the Caucasus region, primarily considering that the near vicinity of Russia is definitely no place for any military ventures on the part of the US unilaterally or even multilaterally. But the US felt obliged, as well as secure and confident enough, to get engaged in an air campaign against Serbia. Moreover, the situation in the Caucasus region, considering the multitude of problems faced by all the countries there, indicates that military involvement by any third party in the face of Russia would be met with a very serious response by Moscow. Thus the "five-day war" as King referred to it (King 2008b) between Georgia and Russia simply set the stage according to engagement rules, and as for the US, Washington would not and could not have reacted in any other way than the way they did during and after the August conflict.

In general terms, various geo-political factors point towards certain similarities between two great powers (the US and Russia) that engaged in conflicts with significantly smaller adversaries without being interfered with, at least not seriously, by the other great actor (though Russian behavior was, at least in the beginning of the Kosovo conflict, rather unconstructive). For that matter, there were most surely politicians in Tbilisi who believed that the US would come swiftly to the rescue,¹¹ as King said to "save the day", and it is quite plausible that Saakashvili or his advisors may have thought the same (King 2008b). But the truth turned out completely different. From that point of view, Georgian fears concerning their country and their freedom in light of their long and troubled historical relations with the big Russian neighbor are easily comprehensible (Hunter et al. 2007; Zürcher 2007). This is the sole reason that Georgians favored, and certainly still do, the creation of a strong state that would be able to repel its enemies, protect its people, and most importantly unite 'several countries' into one state. As King noted, "Georgia's territorial woes are thus not simply about rebuilding a single country. They are about trying to unite several independent ones. So far, however, neither Georgia nor the international community has been able to offer anything attractive enough to woo the South Ossetians and Abkhaz into a unified country. As recent

¹¹ **Author's remark*: There were politicians in Milosevic's government who also believed that Moscow would assist Belgrade militarily during the conflict with NATO.

events have shown, when Georgia flexes its muscles, the secessionists are simply reminded of why they fought – and, with Russia’s help, won – the civil wars of the early 1990s” (King 2004). Thus, it is no wonder that NATO was identified as the potential savior of Georgian territorial integrity, and that the Tbilisi government repeatedly praised NATO for its actions during the Kosovo crisis (Schnabel, Thakur 2000). In that specific sense, understanding the nature of the Russian geopolitical views directed towards exerting influence in the region that Russia considers as its ‘immediate neighborhood’, where no one else but the Kremlin draws the lines, only reinforces the previous arguments and makes them surely more understandable especially on very pragmatic level of Moscow’s regional aspirations.

3) Furthermore, it is important to clarify that military actions taken by both NATO and Russia had **completely opposite ideational roots**, which in itself constitutes the third significant difference. The term ‘ideational’ is used here in order to define the actual differences in ideas, principles, and goals as professed by the NATO allies on one hand, and Moscow on the other. For example, NATO’s actions in 1999 were justified under a “responsibility to protect” (ICISS 2001) the civilian Albanian population from hostile actions pursued by Belgrade and, most importantly, stabilize the region by preventing the conflict from spilling over. In that respect, the interveners themselves carefully avoided grounding their military actions solely on humanitarian needs, and thus avoided possibly being obligated in the future when gross violations of human rights are in question (NATO representatives and Allied government officials were always adamant in presenting their goal as *anticipatory self-defense* to prevent wider regional instability rather than classifying it as a mere humanitarian action).¹² Moreover, as analyst Olga Oliker stressed: “Perhaps the biggest difference between Kosovo and South Ossetia is this: the Kosovo campaign was, fundamentally, about Kosovo. Then, many countries, including Russia, were united in seeking a solution. Russia was, in fact, instrumental in convincing Milosevic to settle. Kosovo was a key moment in the evolution of the post-Cold War era, its resolution a product of years of Balkan conflict and international efforts to respond” (Oliker 2008). Lastly, in the case of Kosovo, “external influences have tended to be multinational in composition and neutral in approach, representing the impartial support of the international community” (Hunter et al. 2007: 1).

¹² Sahin 2009: 235-255. For issues of humanitarian intervention, see Joyner, Arend 1999/2000; Danish Institute of Political Affairs 1999; Simma 1999; Bellamy 2002.

In the other case, the Russian military engagement of 2008 was intended to be a specific response, as King noted, to the increasingly aggressive Georgian attitude and consequent attack against South Ossetia (King 2008b). However, the speed and decisiveness of the Russian military reaction, and especially Russian behavior during and after the short war, largely point to the fact that the Kremlin had long before prepared a plan and was waiting for a convenient moment to put it into motion (King 2008b). Moreover, Russia refused to make any diplomatic effort to avert the conflict between Tbilisi and Tshkinvali, or at least alleviate its consequences, but instead immediately resorted to force that was far from being mere ‘protection’ of the local population (Nichol 2008b). Thus, Moscow’s actions in effect became a prologue to the revitalization of the Russian regional influence. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza, who has been engaged for years in diplomatic endeavors concerning the both Georgian conflicts, said: “(I was) struck by Russia’s consistent refusal to discuss any of the substantive issues that must be resolved if there was ever to be a peaceful resolution” (quoted in Cincotta 2008). Even speaking from a historical point of view, the meaning of the swift Russian actions was clear. The fear of being eradicated by a hostile, dominant power has been an important factor in all the Caucasian conflicts, including the two conflicts in Georgia (Zürcher 2007). Moscow is well aware that nations in the region all have mutual disagreements, many of them stemming from Soviet days, and manipulating these fears has been a successful part of the Kremlin’s cunning Caucasian policy.

4) It is essential to point out the **issue of state sovereignty and integrity** as another differing point between the respective cases. It has been consistently reiterated on numerous occasions not only by US officials but their NATO partners as well that sovereignty as a principle guaranteeing the inviolability and integrity of international borders should not and cannot be used as a pretext for major violations of humanitarian law (Krieger 2001). This principle has consequently defined US foreign policy, and thus in that respect any Serbian claim of state authority over Kosovo as an integral part of its territory certainly did not mean that Serbia had a *right* to employ *any* type of policy that it saw fit, and certainly not any form of the aggressive actions taken in 1998/1999 (Hunter et al. 2007). In 1989 “Kosovo’s autonomy was severely restricted, with power over the police, courts, civil defense and economic, social and educational policy taken by Serbia proper. Virtually, all Kosovo Albanian judges and prosecutors were dismissed from their positions” (Haub 2003). For that matter,

the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution¹³ vested substantial rights and responsibilities in the provincial institutions of Kosovo, and Kosovo's status became nearly equal to that of the republics (Ramet 1992). Moreover, "Kosovo's autonomy included its own identity, territory, international-relations powers, and representation in all organs of the Yugoslav Federation. As a result, Serbian actions to deprive Kosovo of its autonomy, beginning in 1989, were clearly inconsistent with the existing Yugoslav Constitution and law and with accepted international practice" (Williams 2008).

When it comes to Georgia on the other hand, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia were also autonomous regions, but did not enjoy such extensive rights as Kosovo. "According to Article 72 of the 1977 Soviet Constitution only the 15 republics possessed the right to secede from the union. Georgia emerged from the Soviet Union as an internationally recognized, independent state" (Williams 2008). However, though Russia was always very adamant in its foreign policy rhetoric concerning principles of sovereignty and integrity, especially in countless debates at the UN (Oliker 2008), the Kremlin actually annulled them by its actions in Georgia, not only last summer, but in the years following the beginning of the two conflicts. For years Moscow has supported Abkhazia and South Ossetia, predominantly to gain advantage and a stronger influence in the region. The Kremlin was beyond any doubt utterly uninterested in initiating diplomatic efforts that would assist Georgia and the two provinces in establishing a constructive dialogue; thus it effectively and skillfully became a 'mediator' with a number of ulterior motives. In this context Holbrooke pointed out that "Georgian territorial integrity is important, the Russians should stop supporting the breakaway illegal regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Georgia should be allowed to develop on its own" (quoted on Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty 2007).

5) In reality, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia **were *de facto* independent** territories after their respective disputes with Tbilisi began; Kosovo, on the other hand, **was not** independent before February 2008. For that matter, "prior to 1994, Abkhazia had maintained an autonomous government structure. Today, Abkhazians claim to have a functioning government with a democratically elected president who appoints 12 ministers" (Hunter et al. 2007: 10). Moreover,

¹³ **Author's remark*: Speaking in strictly legal terms, it is rather unclear whether the 1974 Constitution gave the right of secession *only* to the republics or also to *nations* within the republics. Thus, the right to secede from the federal state remains a disputed issue in various scholarly analyses.

Abkhazia¹⁴ declared independence even though only 17.8 % of the region's inhabitants were of Abkhaz origin; this was clearly a different case than in Kosovo, where Albanians have made up a majority of the population for decades. As for South Ossetia, though its declaration came at a time when Ossetians were a majority in the province, population migrations were drastically high during and after the conflict; the regional demographic shift was considerable, but certainly different than in Kosovo. However, the international community never extended recognition to the Abkhaz and Ossetian regional governments, thus effectively dismissing regional elections as contrary to established international law. Moreover, various criminal activities such as smuggling and trafficking remain major problems in the region, and the shady war economy still generates profits to vast criminal structures.¹⁵ Meanwhile in Kosovo, the international community seeks to improve the economy, build up civil society, and establish rule of law, though this process will certainly take time.¹⁶ In that respect, the crucial difference between Kosovo and Abkhazia and South Ossetia lies in the fact that Kosovo's local and governmental structures are being developed by the international community and this is part of the reason why Pristina's independence was recognized. For that matter, the US policy in Kosovo "remains focused on building capacity within Kosovo's nascent institutions and enhancing its ability to sustain development into the coming decade" (Kaufman 2008). In this respect, the EU has the leading role in Kosovo, while the US has assumed a more modest responsibility over the years, but still remains the most vital partner to the EU in this region (Kaufman 2008). The EU supplied more than €374 million (Hunter et al. 2007: 32) in various forms of economic support to Kosovo, while the US, according to the State Department annual reports, "is the largest bilateral donor to Kosovo, contributing \$1.1 billion since 1998" (Kaufman 2008).

6) The previous point concerning sovereignty and state integrity points up two other differences between the cases examined here. Firstly, that Kosovo's independence and that of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are the results of **two opposite processes** in terms of differing chronology, specific

¹⁴ Related information on regional figures and national statistics are to be found in European Parliament Document 2006.

¹⁵ For related issues see UN Report Number S/2004/822.

¹⁶ **Author's remark:* Unfortunately, the international community was relatively unsuccessful in assuring protection of human rights, most notably of the Serbian minority which has suffered considerably since the end of the conflict.

timing, and explicit use of diplomatic efforts¹⁷ in order to come to satisfactory solution, thus marking a stark difference between them. Kosovo was the focus of diplomatic negotiations long before any military campaign was initiated against Serbia. As mentioned previously, these efforts were intended to lower tensions in the region and help solve the problems between Albanians and Serbian authorities peacefully. Only after they failed did the air campaign begin. Consequently, the later negotiations over Kosovo's status, after the air campaign had been finished and NATO-led forces moved into the province, went on for several years in search of an appropriate and lasting solution. In the meantime, Kosovo was governed by the UN as a protectorate through the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government, while certain powers were reserved for UNMIK.¹⁸ Thus, Kosovo became a unique case in international relations, as the UN imposed its own rule over part of sovereign Yugoslav territory. However, it is important to note that in another case, that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a similar scenario took place, but an international protectorate was established *over the whole territory* of the newly independent state, while in the case of Serbia the international presence only took over one of its provinces.

On the other hand, the abrupt Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence did not follow any negotiations whatsoever, nor was there any attempt to resolve the disputes diplomatically. Russia was obviously prepared to play the 'Kosovo card', even though the cases clearly differ, against the West in order to justify recognizing the two break-away provinces, and punish Saakashvili for his pro-Western policies – most notably, the Georgian bid for NATO and EU membership (King 2008a). After the August conflict, the Kremlin recognized both regions as independent states in a rather hasty manner without even trying to confer with its European or American partners (King 2008a). Moreover, Russian president Vladimir Putin clearly stated what all Russian diplomats probably agree on, that “there is nothing to suggest that the case of Kosovo is any different to that of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, or Trans-Dniester, and we are not convinced by our partners' statements to the effect that Kosovo is a unique case” (quoted in Tiraspol Times 2007). But as Kutchins, director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, skillfully highlighted: “Kosovo involved years of negotiations with

¹⁷ Differing views on problematic issues of diplomatic efforts to solve Kosovo crisis are presented in Bissett 2001; Bieber, Daskalovski 2003: 101-125.

¹⁸ Constitutional Framework of United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is available on-line at <http://www.unmikonline.org/constframework.htm#1>.

international partners, a very intensive, diplomatic process... (while) Russia overreached in Georgia with a *fait accompli* that undermined its case” (quoted in Cincotta 2008). The US and its Allies responded by rejecting any such Russian arguments, pointing to Moscow’s blunt disrespect for internationally accepted law (Nichol 2008b). Then-U.S. Secretary of State Rice called the Russian moves “regrettable... (and) in opposition” (Reuters report 2008) to all Security Council resolutions and diplomatic efforts conducted by the Permanent Members of the Security Council. She stressed: “I want to be very clear. Since the United States is a permanent member of the (UN) Security Council, this simply will be dead-on-arrival in the Security Council. And therefore, in accordance with other Security Council resolutions that are still in force, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are a part of the internationally-recognized borders of Georgia and it is going to remain so” (Reuters report 2008).

7) Lastly, looking at the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states,¹⁹ the final vital difference between Kosovo and the two regions is **the nature of peacekeeping missions**.²⁰ All Abkhazian political roads ultimately lead to the Kremlin, with its enormous influence in the region. Thus Moscow is using Abkhazian/South Ossetian territory to gain a more stable footing and establish stronger influence in the whole region. In that respect, as far as the international presence is concerned, “the UN and Commonwealth of Independent States Joint Peace-Keeping Force (CIS-JPKF) operate in tandem in the region. The unarmed UNOMIG troops observe the implementation of the 1994 Moscow Agreement and cooperate with the armed CIS forces. The international community primarily works through the UN-led Coordinating Council and the UN Secretary General’s Group of Friends of Georgia. The OSCE has a small presence in Abkhazia... and... is mainly focused on South Ossetia” (Hunter et al. 2007: 11). However, it is the Russian forces that have been acting unilaterally in their own interest on many accounts, and thus in direct opposition to the endeavors of the international community (Mackinlay, Sharov 2003: 74). Obviously, the nature of the peacekeeping involvement in Kosovo is significantly different than in

¹⁹ Besides Russia, Nicaragua and most recently Venezuela have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and Belarus is a fourth state mentioned as one of the closest Russian allies that could also follow with recognition. See RIA Novosti Report 2008; Belfast Telegraph Report 2009.

²⁰ Recommendations of the International Crisis Group to all sides participating in the conflict, and later peace keeping missions, are given in the following report International Crisis Group Report 2007.

Abkhazia or South Ossetia. “NATO sought negotiations that would lead to an international mandate for Kosovo with international peacekeepers deployed” (Oliker 2008). These peacekeepers were intended to be neutral in the conflict, and were deployed in order to provide security and protection (unfortunately for the Serbian and other minorities, there have been numerous instances when peacekeepers did not appropriately in terms of protecting minorities and their rights).

In regard to Georgia, on the other hand, the Russian military presence indicates that the only thing Moscow wants is to maintain and protect the territorial integrity of the two respective provinces, and thus advance its regional aspirations; therefore, any call for impartiality is beyond validity whatsoever. This becomes clear if the Russian position (and Russia provides the bulk of peacekeeping forces) (Mackinlay, Sharov 2003: 80) in the Caucasus is examined. This can only lead, as previously mentioned, to the perception that Russia is a fraudulent broker with hidden motives towards the conflict (Nichol 2008a).

The comparison ends here. I have tried to present a brief but thorough analysis of the three cases, and show that they represent different issues altogether. As Olga Oliker pointed out, these cases “while similar on some points, are fundamentally different where it matters: in their implications for the future of international relations” (Oliker 2008). Though Kosovo is argued by some members of the international community to represent a precedent, all previously argued points prove otherwise. *In a specific way it is a precedent* (Oliker 2008), but only in a very limited sense, as the first and only case of a part of territory of a sovereign state ever being administered by the UN and subsequently granted independence. Though both Abkhazia and South Ossetia also gained independence, this process was rejected by nearly all members of the international community as being contrary to international law and the accepted norms. Moscow may have actually sowed the seeds of its own future problems by providing relentless support for the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Oliker 2008). Moreover, the Kremlin did not succeed in securing any tangible support even from its close partners, which became evident during the August 2008 meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organization consisting of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (King 2008a). As Under-Secretary of State Nicholas Burns said in late February 2008, during briefing concerning the US’ formal recognition of Kosovo: “We don’t see the independence of Kosovo as some kind of precedent that should in any way encourage other groups to break away from nation-states in Europe” (quoted in Cincotta 2008). In the same way Oliker stressed that “the

precedent issue is a bit of a red herring. Kosovo is far from the first breakaway region to become independent successfully. Throughout history, separatist inclinations have sometimes resulted in independence, sometimes in accommodation. Whenever a separatist group seeks independence, it cites those that succeeded before it. It does not cite others that failed to attain independence, like the American South, or those that, like Quebec, found a way to live within existing borders... South Ossetia is therefore a historical turning point, as Kosovo was not. It is forcing Western countries fundamentally to reevaluate their interests, priorities, and policies toward Russia and its neighbors, and to do so in recognition of their very limited, and very weak, capacity to affect Russia's decision calculus" (Oliker 2008). And, to conclude in King's words: "For future historians, the South Ossetia will mark a time when Russia came to disregard existing international institutions and began to fashion its own... (by)... flouting established borders" (King 2008a).

3. The conflicts and current international relations

It was Toal (Ó Tuathail) who said that "states can never abjure their geo-historic situatedness" (Toal 2008: 30). Truly, this seems to be the case with both Serbia and Georgia. In this respect, as both the Milosevic regime and the two Tbilisi governments embarked on 'crusades' to deal with their respective regional crises, both have failed in such attempts. Thus, in light of the few similarities and the certainly more numerous differences between the cases argued in this article, and following Talbott's words that "South Ossetia and Abkhazia might be set up as supposedly independent countries ('just like Kosovo', the Russians would say) – but would in fact be satrapies of Russia" (Talbott in Washington Post 2008), it seems fairly important to confront any such Russian portrayal of its actions in Georgia as 'Kosovo-like' or 'Kosovo-inspired.' In this respect, as Greek diplomat Alex Rondos pointed out, the Kremlin tried to "serve up to the West a textbook copy of what the West did to Serbia, but of course it is a ghastly parody" (quoted in Nichol 2008b). King characterized Russian actions as a move that may be aimed at instituting a precedent in which Kremlin would feel free repeat in similar ventures in its neighborhood, without any fear that these moves would be confronted or rejected by a majority in the international community (King 2008a). Thus, as long as Moscow is able to use various inconsistencies and irregularities predominantly in US foreign policy, it will be able to exercise considerable influence over troubling aspects of international affairs. What is even more disconcerting, it may invite some of its international friends to try or support, if not the same thing, then similar actions.

On the other hand, as for Kosovo is concerned, its independence has not endangered the region, though it did generate a certain instability immediately after the proclamation of independence, and has influenced rather unconstructive attitudes, at least shortly, on the part of Belgrade government and its allies in the international community. As long as Kosovo is suffering from economic and social problems coupled with considerable provincial troubles mostly rooted in lack of security for non-Albanians, plus corruption and crime, the regional situation in the Western Balkans will remain plagued by the legacy of the past. Once regional problems are settled, and they can only be settled gradually by encouraging a wider regional dialogue that certainly cannot satisfy all sides but would surely help alleviate part of the current tensions and problems, the course towards Euro-Atlantic membership will be firmly set.

4. Conclusion

The main point of this article was a specific comparison between the three cases in question. It was my intention to answer the two central questions as put forth in the *Introduction* by focusing on a detailed analysis of the three conflicts, which allowed me to elaborate on their mutual similarities and differences. Thus, I have resorted to developing a specific analysis of the cases, trying to institute an explicit approach that hopefully provided answers to both central questions. Taking a comparative approach according to several different criteria, the main purpose was to prove that, by and large, the differences between the cases compared are more numerous than the similarities. The analytical comparison went on to show that any future formation of a political pattern of independence resulting from Kosovo's current status will probably not happen, even after Russian recognition of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This recognition itself seemed to have attracted almost no backers, except for a few states favoring the Russian foreign policy position such as Nicaragua or Venezuela, or disputed territories such as Transnistria. It sounds a bit ironic that Russia so fervently refuses to accept the independence of Kosovo while, on the other side, it vows strong support for the newly-acquired status of South Ossetia/Abkhazia, even though Moscow claims that the cases are very similar, if not identical. In this respect, the only correct definition of the Russian foreign policy 'game' is an odd notion of the 'quid pro quo' game against the West. The Kremlin's "near abroad" policy still revolves around the old principle of maintaining strong regional influence by keeping client states on its borders. In other words, Kremlin wanted to show the West that it was willing and able to respond to Kosovo's independence by staging its own mock 'humanitarian' intervention in

the Caucasus, where a short contest of arms demonstrated Moscow's willingness and ability, as well as its skill, in reviving the old Russian 'imperial' foreign policy, and a stricter attitude towards the West.

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