

Myth-ing The Relevance of Kosovo's Independence

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Although I encourage my students to engage in wide-ranging comparisons, I was surprised by the Montreal media's interest in comparing Kosovo to Quebec. I had expected questions about regional stability, but received far more interest about Kosovo's implications for Quebec. To be clear, the two situations have almost nothing in common, so my job here is to dispel a few myths about Kosovo and secession.

First, while many have focused on the economic differences between Kosovo and Quebec, the key points of comparison are political. The trajectories of Kosovo and Quebec over the past thirty years have been in opposite directions. Slobodan Milosevic, as part of his effort to gain more power in Yugoslavia, revoked Kosovo's autonomy and limited the ability of the regional Albanian majority to learn and live in their preferred language. Here, Quebec has steadily gained increased control over its economy, immigration, and, via Bill 101, the language of commerce and education. Both Albanians and Quebecers have been targets in national elections, but in very different ways. Serb politicians scapegoated the Muslim majority of Kosovo, competing to be the best nationalist. Canadian politicians appeal to Quebec voters since they hold considerable weight in the national electorate. This means that Quebecers can address their grievances through normal democratic political processes—voting, party politics, representation, legislation, or via the courts. These avenues were not open to the Kosovars.

Second, this concern about the impact of Kosovo upon Quebec is part of a larger misconception about ethnic conflict and separatism in particular—that they are contagious. There is much concern that Kosovo's independence might set an unfortunate precedent, encouraging groups elsewhere to increase their efforts to become independent. However, individuals, groups and governments are far more motivated by the dynamics within their countries than by near or distant examples. One can learn positive or negative lessons from any event, so one takes away the lessons they want to learn and ignore the lessons that might be discouraging. Yes, Kosovo is independent so that might encourage separatists, but, on the other hand, the costs paid over the course of the past twenty years should discourage others.

Third, this concern about precedents might cause countries to be reluctant to support Kosovo. Many have immediately noticed that Canada has not quickly recognized Kosovo, suggesting that its own separatist situation serves as a deterrent. Much has been made of the coalition of Europe's unwilling—Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia---that have refused to recognize Kosovo. However, only two of these countries face a separatist threat—Cyprus and Spain. For instance, Greece opposes Kosovo's independence more due to its historical and ethnic ties to Serbia and its enmity with Muslims and Turkey. Indeed, many of the governments quick to recognize Kosovo face separatist movements: Corsicans in France, Scots, Welsh and Irish in Great Britain, Kurds in Turkey, and so on. This is nothing new, as countries facing their own separatist movements have long supported secession elsewhere, including India when it facilitated the creation of Bangladesh.

Indeed, Russia is obviously the most significant opponent to Kosovar independence, yet it has supported a variety of separatist movements in the former Soviet Union: Transnistrians in Moldova, Abkhaz and South Osetians in Georgia. Vladimir Putin has threatened to unfreeze these conflicts in response to Kosovo's independence, but Russia has long supported these

secessionists and treated them as relatively independent. Putin is, therefore, threatening to keep doing what he has been doing—fostering instability in Russia's neighborhood.

Canada's hesitancy to be at the front of the line to recognize Kosovo might be driven by concerns about the precedent being set. However, it might also be the case that it makes little sense to divert precious political capital at a time where the Harper government is seeking reinforcements for the mission in Kandahar. That is, whether Canada recognizes Kosovo today, tomorrow or next year is unlikely to make much of a difference in the Balkans, but getting another thousand Europeans (from perhaps Greece, Romania, Slovakia or other friends of Serbia) to help out in southern Afghanistan would be quite significant both in Canada and in Kandahar.

Finally, the jump to compare Kosovo to Quebec overlooks the Yugoslav case that might be most comparable—Montenegro which seceded in 2006. Of course, this might not be such an appealing example for sovereigntists in Quebec because the European Union mediated this process and insisted on a fifty-five percent threshold for a successful referendum. While nearly all other secessionist efforts around the world can attract super-majorities of support, fifty percent plus one has been such a high hurdle here that the Montenengro case is perhaps best forgotten in Quebec. Instead, activists can focus on how easy it was for Kosovo to declare its independence, omitting the realities of how hard it actually was.