

Canada and the Recognition of Kosovo: They've got it wrong, Kosovo's totally dependent

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Global Research, March 24, 2008

[The Chronicle Herald](#) 24 March 2008

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LAST WEEK, Prime Minister Stephen Harper quietly announced that Canada would formally recognize Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. This recognition came a full month after the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo declared the disputed province to be the world's newest country. The U.S., U.K. and Germany helped orchestrate this bit of political manoeuvring by the Albanian Kosovars as they knew that any attempt to follow the legal course of independent statehood through UN channels would be vetoed by the Russians.

Thus, after the Americans, Brits and Germans announced their formal recognition, several other European countries followed suit. But a significant number of key countries such as Spain immediately denounced the unilateral declaration as illegal. Canada sat on the fence for 30 days, but finally caved in to pressure from the U.S. State Department. So other than once again placating the Americans, what exactly has Canada achieved through this formal recognition of independence?

Let's start by taking the emotional issues off the table and examining the background. Kosovo is a tiny, land-locked, mountainous, underdeveloped province in the centre of the Balkans. It is located between Serbia and Albania, and not surprisingly, its population of two million is a mix of Serbs (10 per cent) and Albanians (90 per cent). Over the past several centuries, Kosovo has been the battleground for clashing empires. Yet, despite the ebb and flow of invaders and the exodus and influx of ethnic groups, this impoverished province has always remained the religious heartland of Serbia's Orthodox Church. It is for this reason that the Serbian political leadership in Belgrade cannot concede the loss of Kosovo from its sovereign territory.

As Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie has opined, denying Kosovo to the Serbs would be akin to denying the Jews access to Jerusalem. The bloodshed and inter-ethnic violence we have witnessed in Kosovo over the past decade illustrates clearly the strength of this emotional bond.

If the Serbs were to take a purely logical approach to the future of this region, they would have been the first to cut Kosovo loose. When Kosovo was a semi-autonomous province in Yugoslavia, residents of all six Yugoslav republics had to pay a special tax to subsidize the Kosovars. This drain on the federal treasury was one of the factors that contributed to the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early '90s. By 1999, at the time of the NATO intervention, it was the embargoed citizens of Serbia who were alone in shouldering not only the cost of subsidizing Kosovo but also funding counter-insurgency security operations against Albanian separatist guerrillas. Nine years ago, following the conclusion of the NATO bombing

campaign and withdrawal of Serbian police and military units, the international community became responsible for the economic burden of supporting Albanian Kosovars.

This now costs the European Union an average of 450 million Euros per year in aid money, which constitutes the bulk of Kosovo's legitimate revenue. Underground criminal activity has made Kosovo the illegal drug capital of Europe, and the region boasts the highest number of prostitutes per capita in the world. The unemployment rate in Kosovo stands at 50 per cent, and those who are working make an average annual income of just 1,800 Euros (Cdn\$2,400). Nearly half of those lucky enough to have a job in Kosovo work directly for either international administrators or in support of the 17,000 foreign troops stationed there.

Despite the presence of NATO soldiers, the Albanian majority has continued to mount attacks against protected ethnic Serbian enclaves. The largest of these was a three-day bloodbath in March 2004, which left three dozen people dead, hundreds injured, 800 houses burned and a number of Serbian Orthodox churches destroyed. As a result of the ethnic cleansing of all non-Albanians from the region since 1999, Kosovo is now one of the most racially "pure" territories in the entire world.

In making his announcement that Canada will recognize an independent Kosovo, Harper made a point of stressing the fact that this situation was completely different from that of Quebec. I will agree with that but only to note that Quebec is already far more independent than Kosovo can ever be. Quebec has a resource-rich, vibrant economy, its own national assembly, foreign consulates abroad, a unique cultural identity and even a distinct flag.

In comparison, Kosovo is entirely dependant on foreign aid and will be occupied for the foreseeable future by foreign security forces. And those jubilantly celebrating their "independence" are waving the Albanian flag — not the American-designed new Kosovo flag.

Let's hope that by the time the UN General Assembly convenes in September to vote on the legality of Kosovo's independence, the Canadian government will have come to its senses and withdrawn recognition. After all, how can you recognize something which does not exist in any tangible form?

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