

# Russia, and Kosovo's final status

COMMENTARY

By Aristotle Triantafyllidis\*

The possibility of a Russian veto appears to be looming over the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) final deliberations on the fate of Kosovo's conditional independence, as envisioned by the plan drafted by UN special envoy Martti Ahtisaari. There has been much debate about whether an important international precedent will be created.

The UN's bureaucracy, the United States and many European Union countries

insist that implementation of the Ahtisaari Plan will not produce any precedent. But this view is not shared by Moscow, where Kosovo's final status has been directly linked to a series of other "frozen conflicts." In the words of President Vladimir Putin: "We need common principles to find a fair solution to these problems... If people believe that Kosovo can be granted full independence, why then should we deny it in Abkhazia and South Ossetia?"

Kosovo's precedent-setting value thus comes to the forefront. On initial scrutiny, it is hard not to conclude that the international community is facing a unique set of historical circumstances and issues. Kosovo's recent past has involved the unprecedented NATO offensive of 1999; UNSC Resolution 1244 that gave the province a UN-led international administration (UNMIK) backed by an international military force (KFOR); intensive diplomacy over the years by a cast of actors that have included the Contact Group and, more recently, a renewed effort to produce a final UNSC Resolution. It would be difficult to find another region that has experienced such a sequence of



Russian President Vladimir Putin (c), German Chancellor Angela Merkel (l) and EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso (r) attend a Russia-EU summit at the Volzhsky Dvory resort near Samara yesterday.

events. Furthermore, it is doubtful that diplomatic forces seeking favorable precedents in the resolution of Kosovo's status would ever be interested in reproducing the entire precedent that has, after all, included actors such as NATO, UNMIK and KFOR.

Nevertheless, seen in a narrower, more limited perspective, Kosovo's conditional independence might potentially have some value as regards the creation of certain international precedents. If the question becomes how a minority population can be protected on a host of political, administrative, cultural, reli-

gious and security issues, then the Ahtisaari plan does provide a series of interesting ideas, instruments and arguments. However, Moscow's reaction to the fate of Kosovo during the past few months should not be explained exclusively, or even primarily, through any analysis that centers on legal precedents. After all, international relations are seldom decided on the basis of the strength of legal arguments (the history of the Cyprus issue since 1974 illustrates this point). In the author's view, the explanation for Moscow's diplomacy is also

not to be found in any close Slav and Eastern Orthodox ties with Belgrade or even in any of the specific precedents relating to the plan for Kosovo's future status. Rather, Moscow's national interest lies in the active and continuous use by the international community of multilateral institutional decision-making frameworks such as the UNSC, in which Russia is an indispensable, veto-yielding member. In other words, Moscow wants to ensure that it is seriously consulted during any process that decides important international issues (and not ultimately ignored as was the

case with the diplomacy that led to the 2003 Iraq invasion). Russia will probably value its own membership in such a decision-making process higher than any links and concerns about Galgade or Kosovo.

At this point, a Russian veto of the Ahtisaari plan would create a number of complications. First, it would certainly not forestall Kosovo's independence, but prompt a unilateral declaration to be followed with a series of bilateral recognitions by many countries, including the USA. Secondly, a diplomatic breakdown of the UNSC would increase the potential for instability and violence in Kosovo - a development that could have adverse political, security and economic impacts in the Western Balkans. Finally, using the threat of veto might also prove self-defeating for Moscow, to the extent that it could create incentives for major powers to try and decide certain issues in different multilateral frameworks, or even unilaterally, bypassing the UNSC entirely.

There is still time for amendments and additions to the Ahtisaari plan (e.g. a special UN envoy to oversee the repatriation of Serbs in Kosovo) that could both mollify Russia and boost regional stability. Ultimately, Russia should not veto the UNSC process leading to Kosovo's conditional independence. However, in the future, the international community will probably have to consult Russia earlier and more actively in resolving important security and political issues.

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