Sovereignty, status and the humanitarian perspective

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I first visited South Ossetia in the summer of 1995, just as the end-game in Bosnia-Herzegovina was being played out. I was ushered in to meet the so-called foreign minister of the enclave and, to my surprise, a large portrait of Radovan Karadzic was prominently displayed on the wall. When I asked him about it, he said that the portrait had been presented to him by the Bosnian Serb delegation at a meeting of Eastern Christians and that he greatly admired the Bosnian Serb independent stance.

The story is revealing because it shows that the Balkan parallel with Ossetia (and Abkhazia) is not Kosovo but Republika Srbska [1]. These two break away statelets were created with Russian support during the break-up of the Soviet Union - probably as a way of maintaining control over the South Caucasus, which Russian traditionalists regard as their backyard. At that time, of course, the Russian state was not unified and so whether this was deliberate policy or part of the jockeying for power among sections of the military, remnants of the KGB, or Russian mafia who want to control Black Sea tourism will never be known.

Like Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union was divided into a hierarchy of administrative units, based on what were known as titular nationalities. South Ossetia and Abkhazia were autonomous provinces within Georgia. In such units, those who belonged to the titular nationality (in this case Ossetian and Abkhaz) were given privileged positions within the administration, which they were loath to lose, with the introduction of elections. When fighting broke out in 1991-2 and 1992-3 (largely started by Georgia but won by the Ossetians and the Abkhaz with Russian military help mainly in the form of North Caucasian irregular fighters) the majority of the population (largely Georgian) was expelled. Even before this latest war, there were still well over two hundred thousand of displaced persons [2]living in Georgia in tragic conditions. A further 130,000 have been added in August. Cease-fires were brokered by the OSCE (The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, established as a result of the Helsinki Agreement of 1975). Russian peace-keepers were supposed to maintain the ceasefires (along with Georgians and Ossetians in the case of South Ossetia). Both enclaves are isolated, under populated and characterised by fear, lawlessness and poverty, which exacerbate a combination of ethnic polarisation and criminality.

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Among Mary Kaldor's many articles in **openDemocracy**:
"Safe democracy [1]" (23 December 2004)

"America's Iraq plight: old and new thinking [1]" (13 February 2007)

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The debate about the future of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) is rarely framed in human terms. Rather it is framed in terms of status issues and geo-politics. The argument is presented as an argument about national self-determination versus territorial integrity. Expressed in these terms, it is not possible to be for the independence of Kosovo [2]and against the independence of Republika Srpska. If you accept the principle [2]of national self-determination, then you favour independence for both and if you are concerned that the creation of new mini-statelets will represent a dangerous precedent for minorities in other states then you are for territorial integrity.

If, however, the debate is framed in humanitarian terms, then it is possible to arrive at different answers in different situations. My position on Northern Ireland was that I did not mind whether Northern Ireland was part of Ireland, part of Britain or part of Timbuctoo as long as Catholics and Protestants could live alongside each other in their own homes. That was also my position [2]on the former Yugoslavia. I did not mind whether Yugoslavia remained one state or became six states (the six republics) or eight states (the six republics plus two autonomous provinces) as long as individuals could live in their communities without fear of violence. In other words the solution to the question of status should be pragmatic rather than principled -- the principle is about human rights not status. Thus I favour independence of Kosovo because there are good reasons to fear for the human rights of Kosovo Albanians, based on past experience, should the province be returned to Serbia, although at the same time I favour an international presence to guarantee the human rights of the Kosovo Serb minority. I am against the independence of Republika Srbska or its annexation by Serbia because there are good reasons to suppose that the return of Muslim and Croat refugees and displaced persons (who represented the majority of the population before the war) would be even more difficult. I would agree to the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia provided all the displaced persons could return and receive compensation, and provided an international presence (not Russia) could guarantee human rights. And of course there are other possible permutations that could be acceptable, provided they were reached through agreement among all the relevant parties.

The difference between a humanitarian approach and a status approach is mirrored in the different security approaches of the EU and the OSCE, on the one hand, and NATO, on the other. The EU was founded as a security organisation; the aim was to prevent another war on European soil and the method was economic and social integration. The EU's security [2]approach largely consists in exporting this method - although the European Security and Defence Policy also includes diplomacy and peace-keeping as well as what is known as civilian crisis management. The OSCE reflects the three approaches, or `baskets' of the Helsinki Final Act -- the peaceful settlement of borders; economic, social and cultural cooperation; and respect for human rights. In contrast, NATO is based on a much more traditional geo-political approach where security largely consists

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of the military defence of territory - even if NATO is adopting new roles in places like the Balkans and Afghanistan. At the end of the Cold War, many hoped that the OSCE would replace both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Instead, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved and NATO expanded eastwards. While the OSCE was established as an organisation, its role has been marginalised by both NATO and the EU. The expansion of NATO has meant moving what is seen as the Western border eastward, implicitly up till now against Russia, and the rebuilding of the military forces of the new members.

Within the framework of the EU and the OSCE security approaches, the solution to the 'frozen conflicts' of the Balkans and the South Caucasus has to do with dialogue (involving all the parties to the conflict including displaced persons), economic and social assistance to help normalise everyday life, and human rights monitoring and, theoretically, enforcement (though this has been very weak). This approach, which seeks to minimise violence of all kinds, is necessarily slow and messy.But it is thwarted by a geo-politics in which the breakaway statelets are viewed as pawns [2]in a big power game. Thus the independence of Kosovo is supported by the West and opposed by Russia, while the opposite is the case for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Neal Ascherson, "After the war: recognisingreality in Abkhazia and Georgia [2]" (15 August 2008),

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Ivan Krastev, "Russia and the Georgia war: thegreat-power trap [2]" (19August 2008).

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In the South Caucasus, the geo-political approach is dominant. The presence of OSCE and the EU are ineffective, largely because of the geo-political competition for control over the supply and transportation of oil. Russian traditionalists argue that they need to control the Caucasus in order to retain control over the oil, while American neo-conservatives, led by Vice-President Dick Cheney, argue that access to oil in the Caucasus and Central Asia is critical in order to reduce reliance on the Middle East. Both sides seem to believe that influence over the states of the region is the way to ensure control of oil supplies.The key factor in this respect is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline [3]built by BP under American pressure to transport Azeri oil to the West. An uneconomic route was chosen (actually the high price of oil now makes it more economic) in order to avoid both Russia and Iran [3]that passes through Georgian territory. The enthusiasm of Georgia for joining NATO has to be understood in the context of this geo-political competition. The use of force by Georgia to take back South Ossetia and the exaggerated response by Russia also have to be understood in terms of traditional military and territorial thinking, even though, interestingly, both sides tried to present what they were doing in humanitarian terms.

In a globalised world, where instability is largely a consequence of weak states, religious and national extremism or transnational crime, the geo-political approach [3]is much less effective than in earlier times (as argued here [3]by Ivan Krastev). The use of conventional military force brings not control but instability as the Americans have painfully discovered in Iraq and Afghanistan. If the aim of the war in Iraq really was control over oil supplies, as Alan Greenspan assumed [4], it was not very successful as oil production is only now beginning to creep back up to pre-war levels. The same is true of the recent military adventures in the South Caucasus. Indeed the BTC pipeline had to be closed when the conflict broke out.

On that first visit of mine to South Ossetia, the so-called foreign minister explained that he did not have much time because he had to go to the wedding of a relative. Would we like to join him, he asked. The wedding was a raucous street party with delicious food, like everywhere in

the region. (I still have the recipe for aubergine in a walnut sauce that I tasted there -- reproduced here [4]). As the bride and groom departed in a revved up grand old Lada, the young men used their guns to shoot out every single street lamp. The result of Russia's (and Georgia's) August military adventures is more displaced persons, more destroyed homes, more criminality and more fear. The street lamps in South Ossetia and parts of Georgia will not be restored for a long time.

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