Re-examining Sovereignty Claims in Changing Territorialities: Reflections from „Kosovo Syndrome”

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Introduction

As a norm, the right of self-determination today applies only to overseas colonies. In case of serious injustices, international law may recognize a remedial right to secede but at the same time forbids de jure recognition to those territorial units whose political leadership has been successfully resisted by metropolitan central authorities. More often than not this normative state sovereignty overrules the alleged rights of people to challenge their governments. Yet the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia showed disrespect for this same principle. Humanitarian crises in Kosovo mattered more than the territorial integrity of rump-Yugoslavia.

We have learned so far that fundamental preoccupations of geopolitical order and stability underpin the international community’s resistance to secession. Yet the shortcomings of existing post-conflict power-sharing arrangements have demonstrated a territoriality dilemma where any attempts to modify existing norms of territorial integrity are neither in the interest of international community nor conflict torn partitioned states because of the fear of losing control over spatial expression of power. This also explains why the so-called “supervised independence” did not meet the expectations of Kosovars during their final status talks and why the international recognition of Kosovo’s independence irritates the Serbs today.

Here the argument follows that international community is a “territory’s serf” as much as the conflicting parties cling to the self-rule in ethnic homeland/metropolitan state. It is also possible to argue that the Kosovo campaign for independence will have some impact on sovereignty claims in other secessionist conflicts and that it will alter the normative international framework which prioritizes the preservation of existing state borders. While creating a self-determination precedent for states-within-states we still do not know whether “Kosovo syndrome” holds them back or pushes them forward, whether it capitalizes their negotiation stands or weakens their bargaining power. In order to shed some light on these questions, this paper analyses some reflections from North Cyprus, Transnistria and Republika Srpska in their revitalization of sovereignty claims over respective territories.
Sovereignty as a limited property

Vaclav Havel (1999) once stated that human freedoms represent a higher value than state sovereignty and that international law protecting the human being must be ranked higher than international law protecting the state. The NATO intervention in Yugoslavia showed disrespect for the alleged rights of recognized states and governments, thus emphasizing the alleged rights of people to challenge their governments in certain circumstances and to secede from their jurisdiction (Pavlakovic and Ramet 2004). This would allow observers to state cynically that the international community recognizes humanitarian principles selectively as well as supports the existence of states only on paper and under the watchful eyes of international troops. External intervention on the basis of human rights violates the same legal principles that do not allow self-determination of peoples. These are fixed borders and territorial integrity.

In the past, the recognition of state sovereignty depended almost entirely upon a state’s control over territory, as stated in Article 1 of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (Kurtulus 2005: 88). Accordingly, entities were recognized as sovereign states when other states accepted their fulfilment of the territoriality criteria and treated them as sovereign. Since the second half of the twentieth century however, normative standards have changed (Jackson 1999), by paying less attention to factual attributes of sovereignty than in the interwar period. Territory makes sense as long as there are attempts to strive for new nation-states or to maintain the territorial integrity of the old ones. Westphalian notions of territorial fixation and state sovereignty are not entirely falling apart but instead compromising with the international environment (Krasner 1995).

In this way, sovereignty becomes a limited property with rights and powers emerging from recognized sovereign status rather than the possession of de facto sovereignty entrenching those rights and powers (Grant 1999; Kurtulus 2005). This shift from empirical statehood to juridical statehood follows from the reality that recognition represents a political decision that does not, by definition, universally and impartially attribute sovereignty to all actors equally and on the same merits. An argumentation that ‘the international community defends today the rights of established states against the nationalist claims of domestic ethnic groups’ (Pegg 1998: 125), or that ‘the breakdown of a state and its status as a subject under international law are either inherently political phenomena or phenomena with clear political implications’ (Kurtulus 2005 :2) follows the same line of thought.

According to international law, the right of self-determination today applies only to colonies, which are separated from their metropoles by sea (Bartmann 2004: 20). This normative approach in international law discourages small polities from seeking statehood as a means to guarantee stability (Buchanan 1991). In the view of Buchanan (2004: 331), ‘international law should recognize only a remedial right to secede (when it is the last resort against serious injustices) but not a general right of self-determination that includes the right to secede for all peoples or nations’. This entails that many
communities are arbitrarily denied recognition as sovereign states (Jackson 1999: 32). In short, current legal and normative doctrine forbids *de jure* recognition to those territorial units whose political leadership has been successfully resisted by metropolitan central authorities.

As noted above, the international community values stability and order, and because of this there is little reason to expect a sudden demise of this normative framework. This notwithstanding, sovereignty remains a constructed political arrangement, which by definition can be rethought and redefined. Indeed re-examining sovereignty is today’s order precisely because of the growing reality of weak yet international recognized states which often experience secessionist conflicts, which in turn generate empirically viable yet illegal states. So far this re-examination has focussed on ideas about federalism and power-sharing, induced or coerced by internationally mediated negotiations. It has led to ‘an uneasy coexistence and symbiosis between the state and substate’ (Kingston and Spears 2004: 7) or to extremely loose forms of federalism in which the vestiges of statehood are retained yet internal self-rule is predominant (Dent 2004: 3).

Sovereignty as a supreme power shows its limits in property rights whenever there is a new political entity ready to occupy the power vacuum that emerges in the aftermath of that collapse. Here the problem is that the discipline of international law has not been able to establish a legal procedure by means of which newly emerging entities may be granted or denied juridical sovereignty (Kurtulus 2005). Self-determination remains an essentially contested concept because consensus has never been reached on such key points as who the self is or whether self-determination is a political principle or a legal right. Moreover, if self-determination is a legal right, does it include secession (Buchanan 2004)? Given the enduring compromises between facts and norms we keep facing with ‘an absurd combination of states and would-be states in a legal fog’ (Bartmann 2004: 12) as well as with geopolitical interests prevailing over self-determination applications.

**Territoriality dilemma**

Territoriality is a spatial strategy, which is based on affecting or influencing people and resources by controlling the territory (Sack 1986). In this conception, sovereignty comes about as a result of state interaction involving territorial practices that change over time. At the same time, sovereignty as ‘a constitutional arrangement of political life’ (Jackson 1999: 10) means an absolute authority over a specified territory without interference by outsiders. In other words, territory is a vital prerequisite of statehood and the control over territory represents ‘the spatial expression of power’ (Storey 2001: 14). Precisely because of the importance of territory, some actors engage in ethnic engineering and national construction efforts aiming to control portions of space, while being resisted, often violently, by others who attribute equal importance to the same piece of land. Most actors accept there can only be a single governmental jurisdiction over a particular territory, and view sceptically joint government with others.
However it may be argued that power-sharing arrangements within the confines of territorial integrity fit into and do not attempt to alter the current sovereignty regime in international relations. Hence, ‘focusing on absolute notions of sovereignty and statehood, make the reconciliation of subject positions almost impossible’ (Tocci 2004: 170). What follows is a conclusion that both secession and federalization may contain a conflicting logic in their own way. Especially when both internal (zero-sum perception) and external (geopolitical interests) forces work against conflict resolution and even if parties to the conflict have the best intentions to agree on shared sovereignty, territoriality and de facto control over the territory remain of primary concern for both parties in the conflicts. This leads Murphy (1996) to conclude that we are imprisoned within the current political-territorial order and that this fact per se is as dubious as to assume that territory and politics are about to be entirely uncoupled.

Territory and territoriality thus continue to play a key role both in international relations and international law. The principle of territoriality upholds the territorial integrity of sovereign states by demanding respect for their existing borders (Jackson 1999: 25). Although many have argued that information technology and communications have reduced the importance of territoriality rendering sovereignty more complex and multifaceted, Spears (2004: 19) correctly notes that ‘there is a certain irony that at the moment technology has reduced the importance of territory, international law continues to uphold the boundaries of existing states’. Indeed even as sovereignty becomes increasingly fictive and states devolve competences to supra and sub-state levels, territory continues to play an important role, partly because it continues to provide a spatial locus for the exercise of political authority.

Yet territoriality remains an insufficient condition of sovereign statehood. Territorial control alone helps little in providing statehood with the legal attributes of sovereignty so long as international recognition remains elusive. In other words, international law entrenches a black-and-white characteristic of sovereignty: an actor either is or is not sovereign in international law and no shades of grey are possible (James 1999: 41). This is because sovereignty is determined not only by the effective control over a given territory, but also and most crucially by the recognition and legitimization by the international community of states. Independent bids for international recognition yield polities with the necessary criteria of sovereignty but not always recognition from the rest of the world.

There are no basic principles to specify what sorts of units should be recognized as well as no legal principles to articulate the “salt water test”, meaning that legal self-determination is applied only where powerful states allow it to be so. In practice, ‘peoples have been recognized as the populations inhabiting specific colonial administrative territories within the limits of uti possidetis’ (Hendrix 2001: 148) which in fact makes the self-determination of people a territorial issue. ‘Given that there is both geographical inconsistency in its application and an underlying definition of group eligibility that privileges the territorial over the socio-cultural attributes’ (Murphy 2001: 167) we first time approach territoriality dilemma. This refers to a situation wherein two or more political entities are drawn into conflict over self-determination.
makes to claim sovereignty over particular territory will actually decrease its perspectives to gain it because of the immediate resistance of the others.

Granting international recognition to a breakaway state can no doubt trigger a domino effect in other conflict areas. These fundamental preoccupations of political order and stability underpin the international community’s resistance to secession. Yet the shortcomings of existing post-conflict power-sharing arrangements have also generated disincentivizing effects on the will of secessionist entities to renounce their claims to de jure recognition. This leads to a territoriality dilemma second time. On the one hand, the international community has no interest in modifying existing norms that are in favour of territorial integrity. On the other hand, neither secessionist entities nor metropolitan states are seriously interested in operationalizing complex power-sharing arrangements within existing state borders.

International community is a “territory’s serf” as much as the conflicting parties cling to the self-rule in ethnic homeland/metropolitan state. Self-rule means control over the territorial issues that affect the peoples. Both power-sharing and territorial change can happen by legitimate and peaceful means only if international community is willing to redefine sovereignty and reduce territoriality dilemma. Kosovo, where NATO launched humanitarian intervention without UN endorsement in 1999, established a protectorate within a sovereign state and where self-determination was proclaimed and recognised against the will of Serbia in 2007, may indicate a major shift in that direction if not translated into geopolitical considerations of great powers to achieve a new and more favourable power balance in the Balkans.

Re-examining sovereignty claims in North Cyprus, Transnistria and Republika Srpska

Beginning of de facto statehood

In Cyprus, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots were not satisfied with the outcome of independence but more keen on their respective goals of enosis (union with Greece) and taksim (partition). As a defence against their might-be Hellenization, Turkish Cypriots resisted while claiming to have the same rights as Greek Cypriots over the island’s territory and community affairs. Although bi-communality was stipulated in the 1960 Constitution of Cyprus, in the Greek Cypriot eyes, a Turkish minority (1/5 of the population) had been raised to virtual political equality and was over-represented in the institutions of state (Dodd 1993). After the eruption of violence in 1963, UN intervened and separated these two communities by the Green Line. The Turkish-Cypriots were driven into enclaves where they continued to live intermittently until 1974, after the Turkish military intervened and took control of the northern part of the island.

1989 signifies the beginning of the emancipation process from the Soviet center during which pro-independence Moldovans conflicted with so-called soyuzniki with a different
ethnic mix-up (Russians, Ukrainians and Russified Moldovans). Although minority rights were fully respected in the late 1980s Moldovan constitutional acts, dream of reunification with Romania among political and cultural elite in Moldova caused resistance among those residing on the left bank of river Dniester. Reacting to Moldova’s declaration of independence, the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet voted to establish its own state as part of the Soviet Union on 2 September 1990, despite the fact that the majority of reluctant Russophones lived in Chisinau and Moldovans dominated in the ethnic composition of Transnistria. The military conflict of 1990-1992 resulted from the Moldova’s attempt to achieve territorial control over the breakaway region, and subsequently provoked the Russian 14th Army to intervene “for the sake of Russophones rights in self-determination”.

In 1991, the Bosnian Serbs were in favour of staying in a common state with Serbia and Montenegro. As a counter measure to Bosnian Muslim national aspirations they proclaimed the Republic of the Serb people of Bosnia and Herzegovina in February, 1992 with adoption of a constitution that declared “the Serb territories” in BiH to be part of the federal Yugoslav state. An independent Bosnia was declared in March, 1992 just few days after these self-determination acts were conducted by Serb party. By that time the country had already plunged into ethnic conflict, caused by the secession of BiH from Yugoslavia and its consequent partition into ethnically controlled territories. The final settlement of the Bosnian conflict (1992-95) entailed a de facto partition of the territory: the 51:49 per cent division between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. At the same time, Republika Srpska became the epitome of “aborted statehood” (Zahar 2004: 32) whose legal existence was postulated by the Agreed Basic Principles and confirmed by the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995.

Raison d’etre reasoning and search for recognition

Whereas Greek Cypriots represented internationally the Republic of Cyprus and denied any international role for the Turkish Cypriots, they continued to think of inter-communal relations in terms of majority-minority relationship and moved the Turkish Cypriots to a position of separation (Groom 1993). Their declaration of independence from 1983 states both that ‘the Turkish Cypriots have been in a state of legitimate resistance and self-defence in the face of threats and attacks directed against its fundamental rights and freedoms, its political status and its very existence in Cyprus’ and that ‘the proclamation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus will not hinder the two equal Peoples and their administrations from establishing a new partnership within the framework of a genuine federation’ (Declaration of Independence… 1983). Rauf Denktash hoped that the acquisition of statehood would help redress the balance between the two communities by giving Turkish Cypriots an international status comparable to that of their Greek Cypriot counterparts. However, the UN Security Council Resolution 541 called for a reversal of the declaration of statehood by the Turkish Cypriots and urged other states not to recognize the new state (Bahcheli 2004: 171).
Transnistria bases its existence as a nation on self-determination, its separate history, its actual distinctiveness, and on the reversal of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Two states were formed in the territory of a Soviet republic which consisted of two different parts – the one (Bessarabia) that was part of Romania in the interwar period, and the other (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova) that was created in 1924 within Ukraine, based on the hope of the eventual return of the areas lost to Romania at the end of WW I (O’Loughlin, Kolossov & Tchepalyga 1998). Paradoxically, the separation act took place even before Moldova gained full independence from the Soviet Union. According to the Transnistrian view, the MSSR was dissolved by overt acts of both of its two integrants, Moldova and Transnistria. There was a dissolution (or a “suicide of the Soviet republic”) but not any act of secession at any time (The Four Pillars…). Without any historical connection to the “Romanian past”, with strong Transnistrian identity and legal steps taken by Moldovan authorities in order to annul the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Transnistrian independence was declared through referenda in 1990-91, sustained by adoption of the Constitution of the TMR during the referendum in 1995, and at the referendum re-affirming self-determination in 2006. The results of these plebiscites were considered null and void by the international community.

The Bosnian Serbs regard themselves as a community left orphaned by Bosnian Muslims’ and Bosnian Croats’ decision to quit the disintegrating Yugoslav federation in 1991-92 (Bose 2002). For Serbs who live in it, the Republika Srpska is the only guarantee for their survival and existence as a people on these territories (Zahar 2004: 35-39). First, they were excluded from the governance of the area that they had long regarded as an integral part of Serbia’s historical patrimony. Second, they were concerned about their physical safety in the event of the BiH’s accession to independence. Third, the lesson for the Bosnian Serbs was that the potential of shattering their dreams of the re-emergence of a Serbian state with self-determination required an independent territorial base. The main goal of the framers of the Republika Srpska constitution was to convey that it closely approximates a sovereign state declaring that ‘it shall be the State of Serb people and of all its citizens, and that the territory of the Republic shall be unique, indivisible and unalienable’ (Republic of Srpska… 1995). As the Dayton agreement has virtually made the Republika Srpska a state within a state, a status the majority of Bosnian Serbs are determined to preserve, one may question whether formal partition is necessary at all, as long as de facto statehood coincides with quasi-federation structures in an overtly normative legal framework.

*Implications of Kosovo “syndrome”*

During Kosovo’s final status talks in 2006-7, it became clear that Kosovars would accept nothing less than independence, a claim which the Serbian government was highly reluctant to offer. Despite these contrasting positions, the international community came to accept the Kosovar view that there could be no return to Kosovo’s status quo ante, while at the same time rejecting the notion of Kosovo’s partition or its union with any other country. Kosovo proclaimed unilateral independence in February 17, 2008 with the western overwhelming support to its self-determination whereas UNMIK’s (United
Nations Mission in Kosovo) mandate was there to preserve the status quo of the Kumanovo compromise between NATO and Russia which maintained Kosovo legally within the state sovereignty of Serbia. In the deliberately vaguely worded UN Security Council resolution 1244, it stated that UNMIK was to provide: ‘… an interim administration for Kosovo under which the people of Kosovo can enjoy substantial autonomy within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.’ (Pouyé 2005: 4).

Will the Kosovo campaign for independence set a precedent for other breakaway regions? Will it change the notions of self-determination and sovereignty in other secessionist conflicts? These were the immediate questions to be raised despite the insistence of Western powers that Kosovo’s sovereignty claims and changing territorialities in Balkans are unique and should not be applied to other conflicting parties with similar path dependency. The answers to all these questions are inter-linked and will emerge in the years to come. They all relate to the tensions between facts and norms. Indeed claims to statehood persist unabated in all corners of the globe. We have got records from the past when Montenegro’s independence in May 2006 encouraged other non-recognized entities to pursue their claims to recognition through plebiscites. Transnistrians voted on independence and free association with Russia in September 2006. South Ossetia held a referendum on independence in November 2006. And Nagorno-Karabakh adopted a new constitution affirming independence in December 2006. Unlike the case of Montenegro then and Kosovo today these sovereignty claims were not recognized by the international community.

Official statement from Cyprus considered Kosovo’s sovereignty claim as legally invalid and contrary to UN resolutions (Foreign Ministry… 2008). Conventional wisdom seemed to be that Kosovo was another TRNC, a part of Serbia over which the recognized central government had no control, lost in the aftermath of a war, overwhelmingly populated by a minority ethnic group that claimed persecution at the hands of the majority (Hazou 2007). At the same time, many worried that their legal right would not save them in monopolizing sovereignty claims over the whole island while alienating USA and major European powers for a sake of defending their own interests (Why Cyprus… 2007).

Although the Turkish Cypriot daily Afrika claimed that following the Kosovo precedent ‘a division similar to the Czech-Slovak model could be demanded, if Papadopoulos wins the presidential elections’, Turkish Cypriot president Mehmet Ali Talat expressed a different opinion. In his view ‘there is no direct link between the situation in Kosovo and the Cyprus problem since the former was backed by the international community’. With possible new Cyprus negotiations in the offing, Talat once again confirmed the decades old Turkish Cypriot policy that he seeks a new united bi-zonal Cyprus that depends on the political equality of the two communities on Cyprus, as well as two constituent states with equal status. (Úras 2008; Christou 2008).

New peace perspectives with Greek Cypriots gave Talat a low profile: on the one hand he congratulated the people of Kosovo (President… 2008), on the other hand he was in no position to recognize Kosovo and added that there is no benefit for them to take such an initiative (Cyprus PIO 2008). For him, Kosovo was a good example of a country that
followed the world’s will and thus to be also repeated in the case with Cyprus
reunification. At the same time, right-wing political parties expressed the opinion that
‘statements that deny any connection between Kosovo and TRNC have no commonsense
because the language to be understandable for the world is the one that demands
independence and self-determination’ (Democratic Party). ‘Kosovo’s independence
brought a new chance to the world politics, that a nation, cannot imprison another people
in its sovereignty by giving old international rules as excuses’ (Peoples Party)
(Evaluation… 2008).

Moldova’s immediate reaction was ambiguous as well: First, president Voronin assessed
negatively the proclamation and consequent recognition of Kosovo’s independence as
destabilising the world order. Second, he expressed the view that even if Kosovo will be
recognized, Transnistria still have no reason to claim independence because states are
formed on the territorial principle and not on ethnic affiliation (Cooper 2007). The voices
from Transnistria concluded the opposite. Foreign Ministry of TMR declared that the
Kosovo case establishes a new conflict settlement model based on the priority of people’s
right to self-determination. (Statement by MFA 2008). Parliamentary speaker added that
if the right of self-determination is adopted as a key approach, then it should be used in
other parts of the world as well, including Transnistria (Parliamentary Speaker… 2008).
The most modest view was expressed by the TMR president who denied the direct
connections with the Kosovo case despite of ‘having more legal rights for recognition
than this Serbian province’ (Smirnov… 2008).

In BiH, Bosniak member of the presidency made it quickly clear that no parallel can be
drawn between the change of Kosovo’s status and BiH because both sovereignty and
territorial integrity of BiH are guaranteed with the UN Charter (BiH Presidency
Member… 2008). Republika Srpska simply did not exist before the 1990s but was
created during the war. Therefore there were no constitutional grounds for a referendum
on secession from BiH (ISN Security Watch 2008). Yet, another statement from BiH
Presidency Chairman claimed that BiH would not recognize the independence of Kosovo
due to the lack of consensus in this question. Indeed, almost one third of the BiH
population did not support the separation of Kosovo. (Press release… 2008)

This vocal “one third” in Republika Srpska put it bluntly that ‘for Serbia and for us, as
well as for all just people, this act is void and it will never be recognized, neither as a
fake country, nor as the member of any mundane organization or association’ (The
President… 2008). As expected, this position was also confirmed by National Assembly
and Prime Minister of Republika Srpska (Mutual statement… 2008). What makes this
position somewhat vague is the readiness to use Kosovo precedence in their own
interests. In this way, National Assembly of Republika Srpska not only accused the
international community in violating existing norms but also claiming the same right to
decide about its legal status by means of direct declaration of the citizens at the
referendum. Resolution on Non-recognition of Kosovo from February 22, 2008 did not
rule out the possibility of entering the process of self-determination in cases where there
would be attempts to change the Dayton-given status of Republika Srpska, or when BiH
recognizes the independence of Kosovo (National Assembly… 2008)
Conclusion

International community has so far practiced a narrowly interpreted and territorial self-determination which presents ‘sovereign statehood for the chosen few and absolutely nothing for the rest’ (Pegg 2000: 98). While claiming Kosovo case a unique one, international community does not diminish the territoriality dilemma nor give up the “limited property”, the monopoly it has over determining and defining the sovereign rights. As long as international law does not have a logically consistent legal doctrine which would treat sovereignty claims in a universal manner it remains a matter of power politics that follows geographical prescriptions.

The same is also true with self-proclaimed de facto states whose reactions about Kosovo independence happened to be rather divergent from each other. Not all of them considered a “Kosovo syndrome” as an unconditional path to follow in their way towards full self-determination and independent statehood. For instance, North Cyprus preferred a new revised and refreshed alliance with international community in order to achieve reunification of the island. Transnistria was eager to apply for a new conflict resolution format in the name of self-determination without specifying how this all relates to the year ago call for association with Russia. And finally, Republika Srpska got “a stick” to beat those who dream too much about centralizing BiH and abolishing Dayton agreements. The core of today’s conflict is about deviated sovereignty applications.

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