

The Globe and Mail (Canada), 2 November 2007, A19

Why no equal rights for Serbs?

The very Western powers that decry balkanization are preparing to split Kosovo from Serbia

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Should some human beings have a greater right to self-determination than others? If not, why extend more favoured treatment to Albanians in the former Yugoslavia than to Serbs? Should not the same principle apply to all nationalities without prejudice?

The United States and the European Union are preparing to recognize the independence of Kosovo from Serbia. There is a compelling case for this, given the wishes of Albanian Kosovars and the mistreatment they previously suffered under Serbian rule.

But if a predominantly Albanian province of Serbia can secede in accordance with the wishes of its inhabitants, why not the Serbian sections of Kosovo? Three of the northernmost municipalities of Kosovo adjoining the rest of Serbia have overwhelming Serb majorities. Why not let them remain in Serbia if their inhabitants so choose?

For that matter, why not allow independence or reunification with Serbia to the Serbian part of Bosnia, which is in an uneasy confederation with the Croatian and Muslim parts cobbled together by foreign troops and hopes of membership in the European Union?

Granted, Serb forces engaged in atrocities during the recent Bosnian civil war, as they did in Kosovo. So did some of their adversaries. Many of the authors of these crimes have been brought to justice before an international tribunal. Apprehending the holdouts is a legitimate paramount aim of international diplomacy.

But no nationality forfeits its right to self-determination because of the criminal actions of some of its members.

Poorly drawn borders and a casual disregard for the wishes of inhabitants have long been a source of needless violence and suffering.

Consider Ireland. At the time of partition in the 1920s, a border commission was formed to draw a line between the unionist and republican sections “in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions.”

Yet with a South African chairing the otherwise equally balanced commission and casting a decisive vote, large areas with republican majorities were forced into Northern Ireland even though they bordered the Republic.

The gerrymander was asymmetric: No unionist areas were forced into the Republic. It is no coincidence that subsequent sectarian strife has been limited to Northern Ireland. This could have been at least largely avoided with a boundary respecting the equal rights of both populations.

The principal argument against such self-determination is the dreaded prospect of “balkanization” — all the more so in the actual Balkans.

But balkanization is under way anyway. Yugoslavia has so far split into six republics, with Bosnia split into two more, and with the very Western powers that decry balkanization preparing to split Kosovo from Serbia.

Thus the only remaining question is what type of balkanization — one that reflects the wishes of inhabitants or one that is imposed on them?

The latter is the dangerous balkanization. Slovenia is today an extraordinarily stable country because its boundary happened to coincide with the sentiments of its inhabitants. But Bosnia remains on international life support because of arbitrary boundaries that force territorially rooted ethnicities into an unhappy marriage.

The horrific Bosnian war could have been averted if Serb majority regions caught on the wrong side of an arbitrary border had not been forced to become citizens of what was to them a foreign country.

By recognizing the Bosnian declaration of independence without seeking an acceptable outcome for the dissenting Serbian regions, the Western powers helped set the stage for war. That does not make them responsible for “ethnic cleansing.” The Radovan Karadzics and Ratko Mladics will have to answer for that.

Yet it is not difficult to see why Serbs in the region feel alienated. The Western powers have yet to show respect for their equal right to self-determination. That is in turn alienating the Russians, with whom they share ties of ethnicity, language, and religion.

The independence of Kosovo is inevitable and legitimate. But Europeans and Americans alike ought to show a comparable concern for the self-determination of Serbs, for two good reasons.

One is to demonstrate that the principle of self-determination is universal, not selective. The other is to reassure the Orthodox Christian Slavs of Serbia and Russia that they can be full partners in a modern and unified Europe.