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After Kosovo declared its independence on February 18, the international opinion was sharply divided whether to recognize it or not. Already around 30 states recognized Kosovo's independence, including the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and France. On the other hand, around 20 countries announced their opposition to such independence, including Russia and China. Even within the European Union, the split was unavoidable. Though the EU tried hard to perform a unified foreign policy towards Kosovo's independence, countries like Spain, Romania, Slovakia and Cyprus announced their unwillingness to recognize Kosovo, which they are afraid could be a precedent for their own separatist regions.

Recognition of Kosovo's independence has been a troubling issue for the Canadian government. Canada remained mum on the issue partly because recognizing a unilateral declaration of independence could allow Quebec separatists to claim they could leave Canada the same way — with a one-sided declaration¹.

Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier said Tuesday that Canada would "join the international community" in recognizing the sovereign independence of the Balkan republic, citing Canada's commitment under NATO and the UN to protect Kosovo. "What we did today, we joined the international community and recognized Kosovo as a new state²."

Canada was part of a NATO force that intervened militarily in Kosovo in 1999 to stop Serbian attacks on the civilian population and has been since then an important ally in peacekeeping in the region. "It's why today, in this context, that Canada acknowledges the new international reality and will recognize Kosovo as an independent state," he said³.

In response, the Serbian ambassador in Ottawa, Dusan Batakovic, has been temporarily recalled to Belgrade.

¹The Globe and Mail, www.theglobeandmail.com, March 18, 2008

²National Post, www.nationalpost.com, March 19, 2008

³The Globe and Mail, www.theglobeandmail.com, March 18, 2008

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According to Mr. Bernier, Canada wanted to ensure it fully understood the situation before making any announcement about the status of Kosovo. "It was important for us, in the beginning, to assess the situation on the ground," he said. "It's an important decision for a country, when you have to recognize another country. We took our time and now we're ready to do it⁴."

Mr. Bernier dismissed suggestions that the move will have implications for French-speaking province of Quebec. The foreign affairs minister referred to Kosovo as a unique case, because of Serbia's past conflict with its neighbours. He denied it had any similarity to a claim an independence for Quebec.

"It's a unique case and as a declaration issued by Kosovo's parliament also makes clear, and this is what's important for us, the unique circumstances which have led to Kosovo's independence mean it does not constitute any kind of precedent," he said⁵.

Canada had previously remained on the fence over the issue, while other main Western countries followed one another in recognizing Kosovo's independence, mainly because of the sensitivity over the historical standoff with Quebec separatists. Provincial Quebec governments formed by the separatist Parti Quebecois held referendums on breaking away from Canada in 1980 and 1995 but both failed, the last one very narrowly.

The Parti Quebecois, which is now only the third party in the Quebec legislature, said last month that if Ottawa recognized a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo it would have to treat a similar move by Quebec the same way.

After the 1995 referendum, Ottawa pushed through a law to make Quebec secession harder. The law means Canada would never recognize a unilateral declaration of independence by Quebec's legislature -- the same act taken by Kosovo's parliament⁶. However, the Parti Quebecois seized on the federal government's decision immediately, seeing a parallel with its own goal of making Quebec a country independent of Canada.

"We are happy because in recognizing the political independence of Kosovo, Canada is recognizing the entry, legally and democratically, of this new independent state into the international community," Daniel Turp, the party's international relations critic, said in a statement⁷. Canada's path can be seen as controversial, especially by the countries with separatist movements in their territory. For instance, Azerbaijan which faces a long standing separatism from Nagorno-

⁴ National Post, www.nationalpost.com, March 19, 2008

⁵ CBC News, www.cbc.ca, March 18, 2008

⁶ www.news.yahoo.com, March 18, 2008

⁷ National Post, www.nationalpost.com, March 19, 2008

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Karabakh Armenians, announced its opposition to Kosovo's independence and Azerbaijani Parliament voted on March 4, for the withdrawal of its peacekeeping contingent from Kosovo, which was serving there under NATO auspices.

The official position of Azerbaijan became clear, when an announcement was made by spokesman for Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry Khazar Ibrahim at a briefing in the Ministry: "This declaration contradicts to the international norms of law and is illegal", he announced⁸.

On the contrary, Armenian officials were quick to see a possible precedent for Nagorno-Karabakh. "Kosovo may become a precedent for recognition of Karabakh's independence", told Armenian President Robert Kocharyan. "Recognition of Kosovo's independence was inevitable. I don't think that independence of people, which has long lived independently on its historical lands, would not be recognized", Kocharyan said at the meeting with the students of the Yerevan State University⁹.

The same position was announced by Serj Sarkissian, newly elected president of Armenia, "Recognition of independence of Serbian province of Kosovo by the international community will be an additional argument for supporters of Nagorno-Karabakh's independence"¹⁰.

However, we should indicate that not only Armenia itself did not rush to recognize Kosovo as an independent state, but also Nagorno-Karabakh was not recognized by any country since its declaration of independence since 1991, including Armenia. In the case of Kosovo, Armenia was handicapped by Russian opposition to Kosovo's independence and Armenia is reluctant to oppose its powerful protector in such an important issue.

The co-chairs of the Minsk Group, supervising the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, clearly indicated that Kosovo example is unique and can not be a precedent for Nagorno-Karabakh conflict..

"The situation in Kosovo is a special case and does not set a precedent for other regions, including Nagorno-Karabakh. Our longstanding policy remains unchanged: the United States recognizes the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and supports a peaceful and negotiated solution to the conflict. At the same time, we maintain that the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh should be determined through international negotiations", the statement of the US Embassy to Azerbaijan reads¹¹.

⁸ www.today.az, February 18, 2008

⁹ Novosti-Armenia, www.newsarmenia.ru, February 29, 2008

¹⁰ Novosti-Armenia, www.newsarmenia.ru, February 18, 2008

¹¹ www.today.az, February 19, 2008

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The statement also reads that the unusual combination of factors involved in Kosovo, including a specific U.N. Security Council Resolution envisioning a status process and an extended period of transitional U.N. administration, makes the Kosovo case fundamentally different from all other existing cases.

“Kosovo’s declaration of independence is an illegal action”, Russian extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador to Azerbaijan told reporters. Asked whether there will be any changes in Russia's position on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict he said that Russia has never seen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the context of Kosovo problem¹². Though Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that Kosovo’s independence might be a precedent for other ethnic conflicts such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, he did not mention the name of Nagorno-Karabakh.

While the number of the states that recognized Kosovo’s independence increases, it is too early to assume that this will decrease the other camp’s fears of seeing Kosovo as precedent for separatists claims. Countries like Canada and Turkey has already recognized Kosovo, despite their own problems with longstanding Quebec and Kurdish separatists. On the other hand a great number of states, including Azerbaijan, are reluctant to recognize Kosovo, an act that can undermine their territorial integrity.

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¹²www.today.az, February 19, 2008