

## The quiet Russian

Written by Eric Walberg

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The UN vote to refer Kosovo's legitimacy to the ICJ reveals a new political constellation taking shape, observes Eric Walberg 16/10/8 -- In October 2008 Serbia's neighbours Montenegro and Macedonia recognised Kosovo, the world's newest country -- leaving aside South Ossetia and Abkhazia, bringing the number of its official friends to 48. However, after expelling Macedonia's ambassador in a huff, Serbia was soon all smiles as the United Nations General Assembly supported its request that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rule on the legality of Kosovo's independence -- by an impressive vote of 77-6.

The court's opinion on Kosovo, which experts say could take one to three years, is not binding, but it will put a break on further efforts to integrating Kosovo into the world community as an independent country.

The move was a much-needed victory for Serbia, which lobbied heavily during the build-up to the vote. Despite the fact that 90 per cent of Kosovars are nominally Muslim and despite the popular image of Serbia as anti-Muslim, Egypt, Algeria, Indonesia and Iran supported Serbia, showing that this is not a Muslim issue. Seventy-four nations abstained, including most European and Muslim nations, strange bedfellows, but understandably so.

The Europeans don't want to oppose a legitimate recourse to international law. Some European and most Muslim nations have separatist movements like Indonesia, which has to deal with ethnic conflicts in Aceh and Irian Jaya, and Azerbaijan, with its Armenian breakaway enclave Nagorno-Karabakh. Separatist concerns also lie behind the reluctance of some European Union countries to recognise Kosovo. Only 20 of the union's 27 members have done so, with those opposed to the move including Spain, Cyprus and Romania.

It was also a victory for Russia, which has been explaining to the Muslim world ever since Kosovo declared independence in February what a dangerous precedent it is. In mid-March, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said before beginning a Middle East visit that Moscow was urging Muslim states to withstand pressure to recognise Kosovo, a state he said had been "illegally formed. I would like to warn against the temptation to give in to calls from non-Arab and non-Islamic states addressed to Islamic countries to show Islamic solidarity and recognise Kosovo," he told Rossiiskaya Gazeta. Lavrov also pointed to unrest taking place in Tibet at the time, suggesting that Kosovo's breakaway had helped to trigger the "disorder" there.

In contrast to Kosovo, which was an integral part of Serbia until NATO bombed Serbia and invaded Kosovo in 1999, Georgia's secessionist provinces had been functioning as independent countries from 1991-2 and South Ossetia was invaded by the Georgian army and its capital flattened by Georgian bombs, which the Serbs never did to Kosovo. So despite the

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contrary view of the two tragic incidents in the Western media, Serbia and Russia's arguments against Kosovo have found a sympathetic ear.

Only six members of the 57-state Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) have recognised its independence. The day after the independence declaration, OIC Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu issued a statement declaring "our solidarity with and support to our brothers and sisters there. There is no doubt that the independence of Kosovo will be an asset to the Muslim world and will further enhance joint Islamic action." But at an OIC summit in Dakar, Senegal, a month later, OIC heads of state resisted a Turkish initiative and merely voiced "solidarity", leaving recognition up to individual member states. The only six to have taken the step so far are Turkey, Albania, Afghanistan, Burkino Faso, Sierra Leone and Senegal.

"We strongly believe that the support we got from the international community to gain our freedom is the largest miracle of Allah and the largest sign of his mercy towards his people in Kosovo," Blerim Gashi, public information officer of the Kosovar-Arab friendship and economic cooperation chamber, wrote on the Al-Arabiya television channel's website. "We do hope that our brothers in faith will take their rightful place on our side." It is the poorest country in Europe, notorious for drug, arms and human smuggling, and with an unemployment rate of 40 per cent. Kosovo authorities have no control over about 15 per cent of its territory where about 200,000 Serbs live. Local Serbs in those areas recognise only the Serbian government, despite opposition from Kosovo's UN and European Union administrators.

On his way to New York for last minute lobbying, Kosovo Foreign Minister Skender Hyseni visited OIC headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where he met with Ihsanoglu and "expressed the hope that more OIC member states would recognise the independence of Kosovo." While the Kosovar was in Jeddah at the OIC, his Serbian counterpart, Vuk Jeremic, was in Cairo at the Arab League -- all 22 of whose members are also in the OIC.

As if to emphasise where Kosovo's interests really lie, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates was in Pristina at about the same time, the first US Cabinet member to Kosovo since the country declared independence, where he met with the president and prime minister of Kosovo and lunched with the 1,600 US troops at Camp Bondsteel. He just happened to be on his way to nearby Hungary for a meeting of NATO defence chiefs. The US pledged \$400 million at a donors' conference earlier this year.

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Gates dismisses Russia's vehement opposition as sour grapes, an attempt to "exorcise past humiliations", but a less tendentious look reveals a sophisticated diplomatic offensive by Russia with regards, not so much Kosovo, as the Muslim world in general. Russia sees Kosovo as a US-EU invention with dangerous implications for the world. It views the war in Iraq in a similar light, is increasingly critical of the war in Afghanistan, and as such is being actively courted by Arab countries, not to mention Iran.

Moscow's new friends include Syria, eager for Russian arms and more than willing to restore the old Soviet naval base at Tartus, and Hamas, which went so far as to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, putting it in league with Russia's close friend Nicaragua. Moscow is seen as less beholden to Israel, and has shown it is eager to be considered an even-handed broker in the Palestinian issue, having hosted a peace conference last June for the first time.

As president, Vladimir Putin visited Iran last October, Saudi Arabia in January, and Libya in April, his last official visit as president. Recently Russia, with its large Muslim population, has expressed interest in joining the OIC. This thaw in relations has been a two-way street. Russia signed a deal to build a railway in Saudi Arabia and another on gas production in Libya, forgave Iraq \$12 billion in Soviet-era debt, and has forgiven past Saudi and Iranian support to Chechen rebels.

Arab nations see in Russia not only an important ally and counterweight to the US, but a role model of sorts. Political analyst Abdel-Fattah Mady at Alexandria University writes at IslamOnline.net, "Arab countries fail to define a framework for their common national security. Unfortunately, Arab regimes cannot distinguish between their peoples' interests and those of the United States. Russia teaches Arabs a very important lesson: Arabs must settle their internal divisions if they want to join the club of nations that defend their interests without fearing the US. Unfortunately, Arabs lack strong leadership with a clear vision of national security. Neither do they have the political determination to change facts on the ground."

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/918/in6.htm>