After Kosovo: Europe’s Other Break-Away Regions, by Carl Augustsson

A few years ago, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia. Kosovo’s independence has still not been fully recognized by all of the European Union’s member states. As a result, Kosovo’s current status is uncertain.

Kosovo is not, however, the only place in Europe that would like to become independent[[1]](#footnote-1) from the state in which it is currently located. Indeed, there five other provinces in Europe that have already gained de facto independence from their respective states and are now seeking de jure independence. Likewise, there are other provinces—such as Republika Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina—that are both de facto and de jure a part of their respective states (either fully or with varying degrees of autonomy) but would like to become independent.

This debate invokes the dichotomy between self-determination and territorial integrity. As one can imagine, the concepts of self-determination and territorial integrity are often in conflict. In recent times, the international community has tended to favor territorial integrity over self-determination. However, many states such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom have already recognized Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence, in spite of the fact that the Serbian government strongly objects to seeing Kosovo becoming an independent state.

As one can imagine, recognizing the independence of a province over the strong objections of the central government of the state that currently possesses it could easily be seen as precedent-setting. In the case of Kosovo, the ramifications of Kosovar independence over Serbian objections would be particularly strong within Europe. Indeed, this could be seen as one of the main causes of the recent fighting in Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The main purpose of this essay is to examine the other areas of Europe[[2]](#footnote-2) that could try to use the recognition of the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo in order to press for their own independence. This study does not include potential break-away regions in the current European Union member states such as Scotland and the Basque territory.

The following provinces under examination are all (except for Northern Cyprus and Kurdistan) in Eastern Europe. The reason why this is more of an issue in Eastern Europe rather than in Western Europe is that democracy in Western Europe has long reached a point that should the majority of the population of the province in question ever desire independence, it is likely that they would be granted independence provided that an agreement can be reached with the central government in question. However, that is not to say that there are no independence conflicts anywhere within Western Europe. Indeed, there have been several violent independence conflicts in Western Europe over the past few decades. Notable examples of recent independence conflicts in Western Europe include Northern Ireland in the UK, the Basque region in both Spain and France, and the island of Corsica in France. In addition, there are also a number of other entities in Western Europe—such as Scotland and Wales in the UK, and Flanders in Belgium—where a number of people desire independence but have not experienced any violence.

I Northern Cyprus (Βόρεια Κύπρος in Greek and Kuzey Kıbrıs in Turkish)

The Republic of Cyprus is an island state in the Eastern Mediterranean that is majority ethnic Greek, as 78% of the population of Cyprus is ethnically Greek. At 18% of the population, ethnic Turks form the largest ethnic minority on the island. However, nearly all of the ethnic Greeks live on the southern part of the island, whereas nearly all of the ethnic Turks live on the northern part of the island. The two groups therefore live separately.

Northern Cyprus occupies over one third of the island of Cyprus, including part of the capital city of Nicosia (Λέφκοσια). The population of Northern Cyprus is slightly higher than a quarter of a million. Nearly 100% of the population of Northern Cyprus is ethnically Turkish. It has been under Turkish occupation since 1974.

Although the government of the Republic of Cyprus based in the south of the island is often referred to as being the government of Southern Cyprus, it is in reality technically the government of the whole island of Cyprus. Northern Cyprus is therefore legally a part of the Republic of Cyprus and—by extension—the European Union. As a result, Turkey’s occupation of Northern Cyprus is illegal. Northern Cyprus declared its independence on November 15, 1983. However, the independence of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Turkey. In reality, Northern Cyprus is de facto an autonomous province of Turkey.

In order to better understand the situation on Cyprus, it is necessary to examine the history of the island. Cyprus has been ruled by a number of different entities throughout its history. The Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, and Venice have all ruled over Cyprus. The island was under Ottoman Turkish rule from 1571-1878. The United Kingdom gained control of the island in 1878 and ruled over it until 1960. Prior to gaining independence, a constitution that guaranteed the rights of the Turkish minority was agreed to. Likewise, government offices were to be divided along ethnic lines.

However, many of the ethnic Greeks did not like the fact that the island was an independent state. Instead, these ethnic Greeks wanted to see the island become a part of the Republic of Greece. Ethnic Greeks favoring union with Greece seized power in a coup on July 15, 1974. The government of Turkey invaded the northern part of the island in order to stop Cyprus from uniting with Greece. The Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus occurred on July 20, 1974. The Turks expelled the ethnic Greeks who were living in the northern part of the island. These ethnic Greeks and their descendants are now mostly living on the southern part of the island and are awaiting a possible return to Northern Cyprus. A number of ethnic Turkish settlers from the mainland have since moved to the Turkish-controlled northern part of the island. As a result of this, Turkey has de facto annexed Northern Cyprus. For example, the Turkish Lira is the currency that is used in Northern Cyprus.

The island (including the capital city) has remained divided ever since the 1974 Turkish invasion. The boundary between the two sides is known as the “Green Line”. The Green Line is maintained by United Nations peacekeeping forces. The Turkish government of Northern Cyprus allowed Greek Cypriots to cross the border that divides the island for the first time since the 1974 invasion in 2003.

There have been a number of attempts at resolving the dispute and ultimately reuniting the island. The most recent one occurred prior to Cyprus’s joining the EU in 2004. However, this United Nations-sponsored plan was rejected by 76% of the Greek Cypriots in a referendum on April 24, 2004. On the same day, the Turkish Cypriots approved this peace plan by a vote of 65% in favor. There has been some recent progress on resolving the dispute since the 2004 referendum.

II Nagorno-Karabakh (Լէանաեին-Ղարափաղ in Armenian and

Dağlıq Qarabağ in Azerbaijani)

Nagorno-Karabakh is a province which is officially ruled by Azerbaijan but which has been under Armenian occupation since the break-up of the Soviet Union. The very name of the province is a combination of three words from three different languages, none of which are Armenian or Azerbaijani. “Nagorno” is a Russian adjective which denotes “upper” or “mountainous”. “Karabakh” is actually a combination of the Persian “Kara” meaning “black” and the Turkish “Bakh” meaning “garden”. Therefore, Nagorno-Karabakh means “mountainous black garden”.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a landlocked province that is roughly 4388 square kilometers in area. In addition to being landlocked, Nagorno-Karabakh is also completely surrounded by Azerbaijan. However, the Armenians have captured and are currently occupying the western part of Azerbaijan that lies between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Proper. Therefore, Nagorno-Karabakh is currently de facto connected to Armenia. In addition to these areas the Armenians have also gone beyond Nagorno-Karabakh and have captured the Azerbaijani city of Ağdam. The city of Ağdam now sits empty as the ethnic Azerbaijani population fled from the Armenians.

The population of Nagorno-Karabakh was estimated to be nearly 80,000 in 2002. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1988, the population of Nagorno-Karabakh was 80% Armenian, 19% Azerbaijani, and 1% Russian. However, since most of the ethnic Azerbaijanis were expelled from Nagorno-Karabakh during the conflict, the province is now nearly comprised exclusively of ethnic Armenians.

Both ethnic differences and religious differences between Armenia and Azerbaijan play a part with regards to the conflict between these two states over Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenians are an Indo-European people whose language has its own branch in the Indo-European family of languages. In terms of a written language, the Armenians write their language using their own alphabet which is used nowhere else in the world. The Armenian alphabet was invented by Mesrop Mashtots (Մեսրոպ Մաշտոց) early in the fifth century as a way to better write the Bible into Armenian. It is related to the other European alphabets in that it is written from left to right and that it contains both consonants and vowels. Also, the order of the Armenian letters resembles that of the Cyrillic alphabet, the Greek alphabet, and the Georgian alphabet.

In terms of religion, the Armenians are a predominately Christian people who have their own church, known as the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Armenian Apostolic Church was originally a part of the Orthodox Church but has since seceded from the Orthodox Church. The fact that the Armenians are a Christian people in a region of the world where the majority of the ethnic groups are predominately Muslim is significant. Indeed, the Armenians actually supported the arrival of the Tsarist Russian Empire into the Trans-Caucasus region at the beginning of the nineteenth century, since the Russians are fellow Christians. The Georgians are the other Christian nation of large significance in the Trans-Caucasus region. In addition, the Ossetians are also predominately Christian and there is a Christian population amongst the Abkhazians.

The Azerbaijanis—by contrast—are an Altaic people whose language is in the Turkic branch of the Altaic family of languages. As a result, the Azerbaijani language is closely related to other Turkic languages, such as Kazakh and Uzbek and especially to Turkish. The Azerbaijani language is mostly written with the Latin alphabet today. In fact, the Azerbaijanis even have their own unique Latin letter, the “Ə”. The Azerbaijani language has also historically been written in both the Cyrillic and Arabic alphabets. Interestingly, in addition to also having the letter “Ә” in its variant of Cyrillic as well, the Azerbaijani version of Cyrillic also added a number of other letters that are not found in any of the European languages that are written using the Cyrillic alphabet, letters such as “Ҹ”, “Ҝ”, “Ғ”, “Һ”, “Ө”, and “Ү”.

Like the Turks, the Azerbaijanis are a predominately Muslim people. However, unlike the Turks who are predominately Sunni Muslim, the Azerbaijanis—like the Persians in Iran—are predominately Shiite Muslims. In fact, Azerbaijan and Iran are the only states in the world in which Shiite Islam is the official religion. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan is a far more secular state than Iran. Indeed, Azerbaijan may very well be more secular than even Turkey.

The Trans-Caucasus region—including both Armenia Proper and Nagorno-Karabakh—has been conquered and ruled by a number of different peoples throughout history, peoples such as the Russians, the Arabs, the Mongols, the Turks, and the Persians. Some of these peoples have historically lived in or near the Trans-Caucasus region, whereas others were from outside the region. There have also been independent states—such as Georgia and Armenia—throughout the history of the Trans-Caucasus region. However, Georgia and Armenia have not been independent continuously. Indeed, these countless invasions and foreign occupations have had a devastating effect on both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh:

By the mid-eleventh century, the Armenian Kingdom was destroyed. But the feudal principality of Sunik, which occupies the mountainous territory in the Southeast of today’s Soviet Armenia[[3]](#footnote-3) and Mountainous Karabakh survived and became beacons to the rest of Armenia. In the following centuries, thousands of Armenians found refuge in Karabakh, under the protection of the native lords. (Libaridian, 1988, p4)

As one can see, Nagorno-Karabakh was one part of Armenia that was independent more frequently than other parts of Armenia. This is part of the reason why Nagorno-Karabakh is so important to the Armenians. Another reason Nagorno-Karabakh is so important to the Armenians is because numerous Armenian monasteries have been located in Nagorno-Karabakh throughout history.

The Russians gained Nagorno-Karabakh from the Persians in 1805. The Persians officially recognized Russia’s annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1813. At this point, Russia did not yet possess most of the land that now constitutes the present-day Republic of Armenia. As a result, Russia added Nagorno-Karabakh to its province of Elizavetpol (Елизаветпол), which would later become the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. No change was made with regards to Nagorno-Karabakh’s status within the Tsarist Russian Empire when Russia obtained the present-day Republic of Armenia a few decades later in 1826. This is how Nagorno-Karabakh first became associated with Azerbaijan.

The seeds of the present conflict were laid early on during the Soviet era. Stalin made the decision that Nagorno-Karabakh should remain a part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. Shortly after that, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic began to make repeated requests that Nagorno-Karabakh be transferred from the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Indeed, at least six requests[[4]](#footnote-4) for a transfer to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic were made from 1929-1987. However, each of these requests was denied by the Soviet authorities in Moscow. The main reason for this is that Soviet authorities wanted to make a possible break-up of the Soviet Union more difficult by placing areas under the authority of a republic that was dominated by a different ethnic group. During Soviet times, the distinction was largely academic, as the republics did not have much autonomy from the central Soviet authorities. However, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, the ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh—who comprised 80% of the population of the province at the time—now faced the prospect of being a part of the now independent Republic of Azerbaijan.

However, violence in Nagorno-Karabakh broke out in 1988, several years before the Soviet Union broke up. The problems started in February 1988 when Nagorno-Karabakh made yet another request to the Soviet authorities for a transfer to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. The fighting between the two sides endured on and off from 1988 until 1994. As one can see, the fighting broke out even before the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

The war ended with a truce in 1994. By that time, Armenia had captured nearly all of Nagorno-Karabakh along with all of the Azerbaijani land between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Proper. This area includes the Azerbaijani town of Laçin, which sits on an important road between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Proper that was built after the conclusion of the conflict in 1994. In addition to capturing Nagorno-Karabakh and the land in between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Proper, the Armenians have also captured land beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, including the Azerbaijani city of Ağdam. Since that time Ağdam has remained empty and abandoned. Nearly all of the ethnic Azerbaijanis were expelled from all of these areas, in addition to the ethnic Azerbaijanis who were expelled from Armenia Proper. Likewise, nearly all of the ethnic Armenians who were living in Azerbaijan Proper were also expelled.

However, there has still not been a formal peace treaty to officially end the conflict. As a result, Nagorno-Karabakh remains a “frozen conflict”. Recent attempts at a peace settlement have come close to resolving the dispute, but so far there has been no success. The major sticking points are the town of Laçin—which lies between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Proper—and the town of Şuşa {Shushi (Շուշի) in Armenian}, which is the second-largest town in Nagorno-Karabakh and used to be predominately Azerbaijani. Azerbaijan was prepared to give most of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, but not the town of Shushi nor the land between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Proper, including the town of Laçin. Presently, little progress has been made in resolving this dispute. It must be noted that the Russians by and large support the Armenians in this conflict.

Armenia has de facto absorbed Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia Proper. For example, the Armenian Dram is the currency that is commonly used in the province.

III South Ossetia (სამხრეთი ოსეთი in Georgian and

Хуссар Ирыстон/Khussar Iryston in Ossetian)

South Ossetia is located in the Republic of Georgia. As the name would imply, there is also a North Ossetia. However, North Ossetia is located in Russia. Therefore, as one can see, the Ossetians are a nation that does not have a state of its own and is instead divided between two different states. The population of South Ossetia is approximately 70,000[[5]](#footnote-5).

The Ossetians are an Indo-European people whose language comes from the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. As a result, the Ossetian language is related to Middle Eastern languages such as Farsi, Kurdish, Tajik, and Pashtu. However, unlike those other nations, the Ossetians are a majority Christian people whereas the Persians, Kurds, Tajiks, and Afghans are predominately Muslim. In fact, the Ossetians are perhaps the only Indo-Iranian speaking nation that is majority Christian. It must be stated, though, that there is a Muslim minority amongst the Ossetians.

Partly as a result of their Christian heritage, the Ossetian language is currently written with the Cyrillic alphabet rather than the Arabic alphabet. Ossetian has also been written using the Latin alphabet and even the Georgian alphabet. The one unique feature of Ossetian Cyrillic is the use of the letter “Ӕ/ӕ”, which is only found in the Ossetian variant of Cyrillic. The same letter was also present in the Latin variant of Ossetian. It is worth noting that that letter is also found in a few of the other languages that are written with the Latin alphabet, namely Danish, Norwegian, and even Latin itself.

The origins of the Ossetians are somewhat obscure. However, they did not arrive in the Northern Caucuses—the present-day Russian republic of North Ossetia—until around the sixth century. Prior to that time they had lived in areas north of there. Indeed, there is speculation that the origin of the name of the river Don comes from the Ossetian word “Don (Дон)” meaning “water”. It would be at least half a millennium until the Ossetians would cross the peaks of the Caucasus mountains and enter Georgian territory, land that is the present-day South Ossetia that is trying to secede from the Republic of Georgia.

In fact, it must be noted that the Georgians do not even like the term “South Ossetia”. Instead, the Georgians are of the opinion that the area that is referred to as being “South Ossetia” is merely a part of the Georgian province of Shida Kartli (შიდა ქართლი).

During the Soviet era, the Ossetians had requested that a Separate Ossetian Soviet Socialist republic be created using both North Ossetia from Russia and South Ossetia in Georgia. Had that happened then Ossetia—both North Ossetia and South Ossetia together—would have become an independent state with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

As was the case with Nagorno-Karabakh, violent conflict in South Ossetia broke out in 1989, prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union. During the chaos that followed in Georgia after Georgia’s independence from the Soviet Union, the Ossetians were able to separate themselves from the central Georgian authorities. Since that time, the Georgian government has wanted to regain the territory. Ethnic Georgians accounted for approximately one-third of the population of South Ossetia prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union. The exact current percentage of ethnic Georgians in the province is—for obvious reasons—uncertain.

The Russian Federation currently maintains soldiers that they claim are peacekeepers. The Georgians, by contrast, claim that these Russian soldiers are there in order to help South Ossetia secede from Georgia, or at a minimum destabilize Georgia since the Russians do not like the fact that Georgia is trying to join NATO. After all, the existence of two break-away provinces in Georgia is one of the biggest reasons why Georgia was not offered a Membership Action Plan to join NATO at NATO’s 2008 Bucharest summit.

At this point it must be noted that many Ossetians—both North and South—do not see a united, independent Ossetian state as the only desirable solution, although that would be the best possible outcome in the opinion of the Ossetians. Instead, many Ossetians value unity (i.e. both North Ossetians and South Ossetians living within the same state) over independence. As a result, many South Ossetians would prefer to become a part of the Russian Federation rather than to become an independent state if North Ossetia would be unable to become independent as well. It is partly for this reason that many Georgians are even more resentful of the Russian “peacekeepers” in South Ossetia than the ones in Abkhazia, as Russia may then end up annexing Georgian territory into the Russian Federation. It must also be noted that one potential problem with a single independent Ossetian state is that North and South Ossetia are separated by a high mountain ridge that only contains one pass.

The Russians have done a number of things in South Ossetia that could lead to Russia’s annexation of the province. For example, the South Ossetians have been given Russian citizenship by the Russian government. Likewise, the Russian ruble is the currency that is commonly used in the region. In this sense, Russia has nearly de facto incorporated South Ossetia into the Russian Federation.

In November 2006 South Ossetia held a referendum on independence which the Georgians (along with the international community in general) considered illegal. The referendum passed overwhelmingly. The ethnic Georgians in Ossetia voted overwhelmingly to remain with Georgia.

South Ossetia is one of the frozen conflicts in Europe that briefly turned “hot” again. This occurred in August 2008 when a brief war broke out between Russia and Georgia. During the war Russia invaded and occupied parts of Georgia Proper[[6]](#footnote-6). Although the conflict itself was short, it would be several more months until the Russians would be completely out of Georgia Proper. During this conflict Russia recognized South Ossetia as an independent state. However, very few other states have also recognized South Ossetia as an independent state. South Ossetia’s status is no more certain today than it was before the recent open conflict. The Russians continue to maintain a military presence in South Ossetia.

IV Abkhazia (აფხაზეთი in Georgian and Аҧсны in Abkhazian)

As is the case with South Ossetia, Abkhazia is also a break-away province of the Republic of Georgia. However, unlike with Ossetia, Abkhazia is located completely within Georgia and is therefore not divided between Georgia and Russia. The population of Abkhazia is approximately 100,000.

The Abkhazians are a Caucasian people whose language is a Caucasian language that is therefore related—albeit very distantly—to the Georgian language. The Abkhazian language is more closely related to the Circassian languages. The Abkhazian language is written with the Cyrillic alphabet, although it has been written in the Georgian alphabet as well.

The situation in Abkhazia is a little more complicated in terms of religion. The Abkhazians were converted from paganism to Christianity around the year 500. The Abkhazians have, however, continued to maintain some of the older pagan practices. Later on, some Abkhazians converted to Islam during subsequent centuries of Muslim rule. Both Christianity and Islam are present in Abkhazia. “It has been said that the Abkhazians are pagans, Moslems, Christians, and even atheists simultaneously” (Benet, 1974, p91).

Abkhazia has been a part of a number of different kingdoms and empires throughout history, including both the Greek and Roman Empires and the Kingdom of Georgia. Abkhazia first came under the control of the Tsarist Russian Empire in 1810 as a protectorate. Tsarist Russia fully incorporated Abkhazia into its empire in 1864. Abkhazia became a part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1931. As a result of this, Abkhazia was a part of the Republic of Georgia when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991.

Many Abkhazians wanted to secede from Georgia. This was in spite of the fact that Abkhazians only formed approximately 20% of the population of the province at this point. Fighting broke out between Abkhazian separatists and the Georgian military in 1992. The Georgian military was expelled from Abkhazia in 1993. Part of the reason why the Georgian military was expelled was because Georgia was experiencing a civil war at that time. With the expulsion of the Georgian military came the fleeing of over quarter of a million ethnic Georgian refugees who are still unable to return to their homes.

As is the case with South Ossetia, Russia maintains soldiers in Abkhazia that the Russians claim are peacekeepers but that the Georgians claim are there in order to destabilize Georgia and even annex territory for the Russian Federation. Indeed, the situation with regards to Abkhazia is similar to the situation with regards to South Ossetia, as many Abkhazians have been given Russian citizenship. More importantly, the Abkhazian conflict also briefly became hot again in August 2008 when the Russians opened a second front in the war with Georgia. As is also the case with South Ossetia, Russia and later a small handful of other states recognized Abkhazia as an independent state during the August 2008 conflict. Abkhazia’s final status is no more certain now than it was before the recent conflict.

V Trans-Dniester

Trans-Dniester is a province in the eastern part of Moldova. Unlike most of the rest of the Republic of Moldova—which is largely comprised of ethnic Romanians— Trans-Dniester is largely comprised of ethnic Russians and some ethnic Ukrainians. The population of Trans-Dniester is approximately 700,000.

In one sense, Moldova is basically an extension of Romania, as the Moldovan language is essentially a dialect of Romanian. It is worth noting that during the Soviet era, the Moldovans were forced to write their language with the Cyrillic alphabet. It was not until 1989 that they were permitted to switch back to writing with Latin letters.

In addition to speaking the Romanian language, the Moldovans have also lived within the boundaries of the Romanian state before. In fact, Romania possessed Moldova prior to the Second World War. During the war, the Soviet Union took Moldova—then known as Moldavia—from Romania. It is important to note that Tsarist Russia did once possess the territory of what is now the independent state of Moldova. After the war, Moldova was incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldavia, one of the now (after World War Two) fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics. As a result, Moldova became an independent state with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The largely Russian-speaking Trans-Dniester region was incorporated into the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. At the time, the fact that Trans-Dniester was a part of a predominately Romanian-speaking republic was of little consequence since the central Russian-speaking authorities held so much power of the whole of the Soviet Union.

However, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, Trans-Dniester was now going to be ruled by a Romanian-speaking state. Worse yet, to many of the Russian-speakers in Trans-Dniester, there was (at the time) some talk of the now independent Republic of Moldova joining Romania. If this were to happen, the Russian-speakers in Trans-Dniester would comprise a small percentage of the population within Romania. Indeed, the ethnic Russians of Trans-Dniester would not even be the largest minority group within Romania.

It is important to note that little progress has ever been made with regards to reunification with Romania. In fact, the Moldovan government has consistently rejected the idea of joining Romania. However, the Romanian government has offered Romanian citizenship to Moldovans, and a large percentage of Moldovans has received Romanian citizenship. Also, it is important to remember that reunification with Romania may become increasingly popular now that Romania is a member of both NATO and the European Union. After all, at this point joining Romania would—to many Moldovans—simply mean seeing their state unite with another state in which they already have citizenship. Moreover, when compared to Moldova, Romania is a far more prosperous state. In short, even though there is little discussion of Moldova joining Romania as of now, there is a fairly strong possibility that such talk could become prevalent in the future.

As a result of all of this, many of the ethnic Russians decided that their best option was to break-away from Moldova. Consequently, Trans-Dniester declared independence from Moldova shortly after Moldova itself had declared independence from the Soviet Union.

A short war broke out between the two sides. The war ended with a cease-fire agreement in July of 1992. Currently the Moldovan government has no control of Trans-Dniester. Instead, there are Russian soldiers patrolling Trans-Dniester and Trans-Dniester has become a de facto oblast of the Russian Federation. The currency that is used in Trans-Dniester is called the coupon and it is pegged to the Russian Ruble.

VI Russian Regions[[7]](#footnote-7) (Россия)

The Russian Federation is the world’s largest state in terms of geographic area and is the eighth largest state in terms in population. Russia—partly as a result of its large size—has a number of different ethnic minorities living within its territory. Some of these ethnic minorities would like to secede from Russia. However, in order to understand the likelihood to secession from the Russian Federation, it is necessary to understand the complicated federal structure in Russia.

The Russian Federation is—as the name would imply—a federation, as are many of the world’s other large states such as the United States and Germany. Russian federalism is, however, probably the most complicated form of federalism ever created:

There are 89 members (federal territorial units) of the Russian Federation. The recognized territories consist of 21 autonomous republics, six krais (provinces), 49 oblasts (regions), two cities of federal status, one autonomous oblast and 10 autonomous okrugs (districts). Largely based on the old Soviet divisions, their status as constituent members of the Federation began to be regularized by the so-called Federation Treaty of 31 March 1992. These three documents provided for a union of 20 republics (16 of which had been Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics—ASSRs under the old regime, and four of which were autonomous oblasts), six krais and one autonomous oblast. The 10 autonomous okrugs remained under the jurisdiction of the krai or oblast within which they were located (a situation which largely continued throughout the 1990s) but, as federal units, were raised to the same status as oblasts and krais. A further republic, Ingushetia, was acknowledged in June 1992. Moscow [Москва] and St. Petersburg [Санкт Петербург] subsequently assumed the status of independent cities. (Europa Publications, 1999, p29)

As one can see, there are six different types of territorial units into which the Russian Federation is divided. Three of the types of territorial units: autonomous republics, the one autonomous oblast, and the autonomous okrugs, are based on ethnicity. By contrast, oblasts and krais (and for that matter the two territorial cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg) are based merely on geography. Having six different types of territorial units is more than most (or even all) of the world’s other federations have. At this point, it is necessary to examine how the various types of the Russian territorial units differ from each other.

As one can see, oblasts are by far the most common type of territorial unit in Russia, as over half of all of the territorial units in Russia are oblasts. The exact number of oblasts in Russia is 49. Oblasts are in essence the basic territorial unit in Russia, as they are both the most common form of territorial unit in Russia and they are not based on ethnic background, though some oblasts do carry the names of ethnic groups that either lived there at one point or still live there but are now a small minority. Likewise, the two federal cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg are also based merely on geography and not on ethnicity. Ethnic Russians form the majority of the population in all 51 of these two different types of territorial units.

The other type of territorial unit that is not based on ethnicity is krais. “Krai” means “edge” in many of the Slavic languages, including Russian. As the name would imply, krais lie on the geographic edge of Russia. There are six krais in Russia. Two of the krais: Krasnodarsk (Краснодарск) and Stavropol (Ставропол) are located in the Caucasus region. Another two of the krais: Primorye (Приморе) and Khabarovsk (Харбаровск) are located in the southeast of Siberia on the eastern Chinese and (in the case of Primorye) the North Korean border. The other two krais are Krasnoyarsk (Красноярск) in central Siberia and Altai (Алтай) Krai, which lies on the northeastern border of Kazakhstan. It is important to remember that Altai Krai is separate from Altai Republic, although the two do share a common border.

The second most common Russian territorial unit is the autonomous republic, or simply “republic”. Republics have more autonomy than any other Russian territorial unit:

Under the terms of the 1992 treaties, republics were granted far wider-reaching powers than the other federal units, specifically over the use of natural resources and land. They consequently represent autonomous states within the Russian Federation, as opposed to being merely administrative units of a unitary state. The exact delimitation of powers remained controversial and, often, modified by bilateral treaty between a territory and the central authorities. This process began in 1995 with treaties with seven republics and one oblast, but by the end of 1998 more than one-half of all the territories had signed such agreements. In March 1996 the precise terms of the delimitation of jurisdiction and powers between federal and regional authorities was [sic] decreed; no treaty could change the status of a federal unit, threaten the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation or violate the terms of the federal Constitution. (Europa Publications, 1999, p29)

As was previously stated, the republics in Russia are not merely geographic divisions but are also based on the existence of ethnic minorities. It must be noted, though, that some of the ethnic minorities in Russia now speak Russian as their first language, even in some of the autonomous ethnic republics. However, in most of these republics the native languages are spoken by at least 70%-80% of the indigenous population.

It must also be remembered that ethnic Russians do form the majority of the population in some of these “ethnic republics”. As a result, the ethnic group for which the republic in question is named is sometimes merely a significant minority located within the republic. As a result, “[m]any…ethnic territories are more in the nature of heritage sites”. (Europa Publications, 1999, p4) Likewise, ethnic Russians nearly always comprise a significant minority of the population in the autonomous republics in which they are neither in the majority nor in the plurality.

A good example of an autonomous republic with an ethnic Russian majority is Karelia (Карелия), an autonomous republic that sits on the Finnish border. Ethnic Russians form 73.6% of population[[8]](#footnote-8) of Karelia. By contrast, the ethnic Karelians—who are a Uralic people whose language is closely related to both Finnish and Estonian—only form 10% of the population of Karelia. However, a slight majority of ethnic Karelians speak Russian as their first language. The dominate religion amongst the Karelians is Orthodox Christianity.

In addition to Karelia there are 20 other republics in Russia. Eight of these republics: Chechnya (Чеченя), Dagestan (Дагестан), North Ossetia (Северная Оссетия), Ingushetia (Ингушетия), Karachayevo-Circassia (Карачаёво-чиркассия), Kabardino-Balkariya (Кабардино-Балкария), Adygeya (Адигея), and Kalmykia (Калмикия)[[9]](#footnote-9) lie in the Caucasus region. Ethnic Russians form the majority of the population in Adygeya, (68%) and have a plurality of the population in Karachayevo-Circassia (42.4%).

Other than in North Ossetia and Kalmykia, the indigenous populations in all of these republics are of Caucasian origin and speak Caucasian languages. The partial exception to this is the two republics: Karachayevo-Circassia and Kabardino-Balkaria that have a hyphenated name. In both of these two cases one of the nationalities mentioned in the name is of Caucasian origin whereas the other nationality mentioned in the name is of Turkic Altaic origin. In the case Karachayevo-Circassia, the Karachai—who form 31.2% of the republic’s population—are of Turkic Altaic origin, whereas the Circassians—who form 9.7% of the republic’s population—are Caucasian. As for Kabardino-Balkaria, the Kabardins—who form 48.2% of the republic’s population—are the Caucasian nationality and the Balkirs—who form 9.4% of the republic’s population—are the Turkic Altaic nation. Ethnic Russians form 32% of the population of Kabardino-Balkaria. In terms of religion the indigenous population of these six Caucasian republics (including both the two Caucasian nations and the two Turkic Altaic nations in the two republics with hyphenated names) are all predominately Muslim.

In the case of North Ossetia, the indigenous population is of Indo-European extraction whose language is closely related to Persian and Kurdish. Likewise, unlike the Caucasian republics, the majority of Ossetians are Orthodox Christian, though there is a Muslim minority amongst the Ossetians. The ethnic Russians comprise 29.9% of the population of North Ossetia.

The Kalmykians, interestingly, are majority Buddhists, making Kalmykia the only place west of the Ural Mountains where Buddhism is practiced by a large segment of the population. The Kalmykian language comes from the Mongol branch of the Altaic language family and is therefore distantly related to the Turkic languages such as Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Kazakh. Kalmykian is, therefore, naturally more closely related to languages such as Mongolian and Buryatian, which are also of Mongol Altaic origin. At 45.4%, ethnic Kalmykians are a plurality of the Kalmykian population; ethnic Russians form 37.7% of the population of Kalmykia.

As has already been demonstrated in this essay, there are a number of conflicts within the Caucasus region. The same thing is true in the Russian parts of the Caucasus region. Indeed, the Caucasus region of Russia is the area of Russia that is most likely to experience secession.

There is another collection of republics in Russia that lies in and around the Ural Mountains. This cluster contains six republics: Tatarstan (Татарстан), Mordovia (Мордовия), Chuvashia (Чувашия), Bashkortostan (Башкортостан), Mari-El (Марий-Ел), and Udmurtia (Удмуртия). Ethnic Russians form the majority of the population in Mordovia (60.8% in 1990) and Udmurtia (58.9%). Likewise, ethnic Russians have a plurality in Bashkortostan and in Mari-El. In the case of Bashkortostan, ethnic Russians form 39% of the population, ethnic Tatars form 25%, and ethnic Bashkirs form 22% of the population. In the case of Mari-El, ethnic Russians constitute 47.5% of the population whereas the Maris constitute 43.3% of the population.

Three of these six republics: Tatarstan, Chuvashia, and Bashkortostan are named for Turkic Altaic ethnic groups who speak Altaic languages. The Tatars are predominately Muslim, whereas the Chuvash are divided between Orthodox Christianity and Islam. The majority of Bashkirs are also Muslim. However, there is also an Orthodox Christian minority amongst the Bashkirs. It is important to note that the ethnic Tatars are the largest non-Slavic people in the Russian Federation. In the case of Chuvashia, ethnic Russians are in the minority at 26.7% of the population.

The other three republics in the Ural region of the Russian Federation: Mordovia, Mari-El, and Udmurtia are all named for ethnic groups that speak Finnic Uralic languages. They are all therefore related to the Karelians, the Finns, and the Estonians. The dominate religion amongst all three of these nations is Orthodox Christianity, though in the case of Mari-El Orthodox Christianity is sometimes intermixed with some elements of the older animistic traditions.

The final cluster of Russian republics lies in southern Siberia along the Mongolian border. There are four republics in this cluster of Russian republics: Altai (Алтай) Republic, Khakassia (Хакассия), Tuva (Тува), and Buryatia (Бурятия). Ethnic Russians form the majority of the population in all of these republics except for Tuva where ethnic Russians form 32% of the population. As for the other three republics, ethnic Russians form 60% of the population in Altai Republic, 79.5% of the population in Khakassia, and 70% of the population in Buryatia.

The various nations in these four republics are all of Altaic origin, with the Buryats being of Mongol Altaic and the other three of Turkic Altaic origin. In the case of the Altai though, there are actually two different languages spoken, but both are of Turkic Altaic origin. In terms of religion, this part of Russia (along with Kalmykia) is the one place in Russia where Buddhism is practiced, as Buddhism is the dominate religion amongst the Tyvans and the Buryats, although there is an Orthodox Christian minority amongst the Buryats. By contrast, the Altai are predominately Orthodox Christian.

There are two other republics which do not share a common border with any of the other republics. One of these two republics is Komi (Коми), a republic that lies in the northwest of Russia. Ethnic Russians form 57.7% of the population of Komi, whereas the ethnic Komi form 23.3% of the population. The Komi speak a Finnic Uralic language related to both Finnish and Estonian. In terms of religion the Komi are majority Orthodox Christian, though some Komi do mix the Orthodox faith with older animist traditions.

The last republic in Russia is Yakutia (Якутия), also known as Sakha (Саха). Yakutia lies in the far north of Siberia. Ethnic Russians form 50.3% of the population in Yakutia, whereas the ethnic Yakuts form 33.4% of the population in Yakutiya. Interestingly, the ethnic Yakuts are—apart from Russians—the largest ethnic group in Siberia. The Yakuts speak a Turkic Altaic language and are predominately Orthodox Christian in terms of religion. At 3,103,200 square kilometers Yakutia is the largest territorial unit in Russia. Indeed, Yakutia comprises approximately slightly more than one sixth of the entire territory of the Russian Federation. In fact, Yakutia is larger than all but six of the world’s independent states. However, in spite of the republic’s large size, the population of Yakutia only stands at approximately one million.

There is only one autonomous oblast in Russia: the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. The Jewish autonomous oblast is located in the far east of Russia on the border of northeastern China. The Jewish Autonomous Oblast is small in terms of both geographic area (36,000 square kilometers) and population (estimated at 210,000 in January 1996). The Jewish Autonomous Oblast is a huge misnomer as only 4.2% of the population of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast is actually Jewish. Instead, ethnic Russians compose 83.2% of the autonomous oblast’s population. The history of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, however, goes back to the beginning of the Soviet era:

The Soviet regime established an autonomous Jewish province at Birobizhan [Биробижан, the capital and largest city in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast] in 1928, but it never became the centre of Soviet (or Russian) Jewry. It was renamed the Jewish Autonomous Oblast on 7 May 1934 and formed part of the Khabarovsk [Хабаровск] Krai until 25 March 1991. (Europa Publications, 1999, p254)

In the end, the existence of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was mostly symbolic. Ultimately, “it was more of a message to Soviet Jewry than any sort of homeland”. (Europa Publications, 1999, p4)

The last type of territorial unit in Russia is autonomous okrugs. Autonomous okrugs are basically territorial units which are autonomous from other territorial units rather than directly from the central government in Moscow, as is the case with republics. In short, they are territorial units within territorial units. There are ten autonomous okrugs within the Russian Federation.

Half of Russia’s autonomous okrugs lie together in a cluster in north-central Russia. The western-most of these autonomous oblasts is Nenets (Ненец). Nenets is a part of the Archangel (Архангел) oblast. Seventy percentage of the population of Nenets is ethnic Russian, whereas the ethnic Nenets themselves are only 15.6% of the autonomous okrug’s population. The Nenets are a Samoyedic Uralic people. There are two other autonomous okrugs that are also named after the Nenets; both of these autonomous okrugs lie in this cluster of five autonomous okrugs. One of these other autonomous okrugs named after the Nenets is Yamal Nenets (Ямал-Ненец). Yamal Nenets is a part of Tyuman (Тьюман) Oblast. As is the case in Nenets, the percentage of the population of Yamal Nenets that is ethnic Nenets is quite small, at 6.7%. Ethnic Russians, by contrast, form 62.8% of the autonomous okrug’s population. The other autonomous okrug that is named after the Nenets is Dolgan-Nenets (Долган-Ненец), also known as Taimyr (Таймир). Taimyr is a part of Krasnoyarsk (Краснодарск) Krai. Again, ethnic Russians form the majority of the population (67.1%) of the autonomous okrug. However, as one can see, this autonomous okrug is named after two different nations: the Nenets and the Dolgan. The ethnic Nenets form 11.9 % of Taimyr’s population whereas the ethnic Dolgan form 8.9% of the autonomous okrug’s population.

One of the other two autonomous okrugs that is located in this cluster of five autonomous okrugs is Khanty-Mansii (Ханти-Мансий). Khanty-Mansii is, like Yamal Nenets, a part of Tyuman Oblast. Once again, ethnic Russians have a solid majority of the population, 66.3%. By contrast, the ethnic Khants and the ethnic Mansi are both a small percentage of the autonomous okrug’s population, 0.9% and 0.5% respectively. Both the Khants and the Mansis are a Finnic Uralic people. The final autonomous okrug in this cluster of autonomous okrugs is Evenk (Евенк). Evenk, like Taimyr, is also a part of Krasnodarsk Krai. Ethnic Russians comprise 67% Evenk’s population whereas the ethnic Evenks comprise 14% of the population.

Two of Russia’s autonomous okrugs lie in the far northeast of Siberia. Another autonomous okrug in the far east of Russia is Koryak (Коряк). Koryak is a part of Kamchatka (Камчатка) Oblast.

Two of Russia’s autonomous okrugs are enclaved within other Russian territorial units. Both of these enclaved autonomous okrugs are named after ethnic Buryats and are enclaved within oblasts. One of these enclaved okrug is Ust-Orda Buryatia (Уст-Орда Бурятия), which is enclaved with Irkutsk (Иркуцк) Oblast. The other enclaved autonomous okrug is Aga-Buryatia (Ага-Бурятия), which is enclaved with Chita (Чита) Oblast.

Only one autonomous okrug, Komi-Permyak (Коми-Пермяк), is located west of the Ural Mountains. Komi-Permyak is a part of Perm (Перм) Oblast. Unlike in most of Russia’s other autonomous okrugs, ethnic Russians are (at 6.1%) a (small) minority of the population in Komi-Permyak. The Komi-Permyak comprise 60.2% of the autonomous okrug’s population. “The Komi Permyaks speak two dialects of the Finnic division of the Uralo-Altaic[[10]](#footnote-10) linguistic family” (Europa Publications, 1999, p266).

As one can see, there are a number of different ethnic minorities living within the Russian Federation. This can be expected when one considers Russia’s enormous size. Most of these ethnic minorities are either of Uralic, Altaic, or Caucasian origin. While many of these ethnic minorities are Orthodox Christians, many are also Muslims and some are even Buddhists. It is important to remember that there is a number of ethnic minorities in Russia that do not have their own autonomous republics or autonomous okrugs. Some of Russia’s oblasts are named after various ethnic groups that do not enjoy any degree of autonomy from the Russian Federation.

However, it is also important to remember that ethnic Russians do comprise 80%[[11]](#footnote-11) of the population of the whole of the Russian Federation. This can also be expected since most of the territorial units in Russia are based on geography rather than ethnicity and are therefore majority ethnic Russian in population. Likewise, ethnic Russians even form the majority of the population in some of the territorial units that are based (at least in name) on an ethnic minority. It is therefore not surprising that ethnic Russians are so dominant within the Russian Federation.

Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated, in some cases ethnic minorities[[12]](#footnote-12) form the majority of the population in certain territorial units of Russia. It is in these territorial units that there is a possibility of secession, especially considering the fact that Kosovo has basically been allowed to secede from Serbia over both Serbian and Russian objections. At this point, it is necessary to examine the parts of Russia that could potentially attempt to secede from the Russian Federation.

A Chechnya (Чечня in Russian and Нохчийчоь in Chechen)

The most obvious example of a Russian republic that may attempt to secede is Chechnya, the one that has already attempted to secede. Chechnya is located in the Caucasus region, a region that—as has been demonstrated—contains several frozen conflicts. However, unlike those other conflicts, the Chechen conflict is not frozen, as the Russians have been able to largely crush and therefore end the Chechen uprising.

The Chechens are a Caucasian people whose language is related to the Circassian languages and more distantly to the Georgian language. The Chechen language has been written using the Cyrillic alphabet, the Latin, and the Arabic alphabet. In terms of religion, the Chechens are predominately Muslim.

Russian rule came to Chechnya more than half a century later than in other parts of the Caucasus region, as the Chechens put up a much fiercer resistance to the Russians than did many of the other peoples of the Caucasus region. The Russians were unable to fully conquer Chechnya until 1859. The Chechens would later try to secede from Russia during the Russian revolution, but the Soviet forces were able to conquer Chechnya in 1922. The Chechens would also later use the Nazi occupation to press for independence. As a result of this, the Chechens were punished by Stalin, who had many of them deported to Siberia. The Chechens were allowed to return home under Khrushchev’s (Хрущев) leadership.

Largely out of these cultural and religious differences and due to historical events, the Chechens attempted to secede from Russia in 1994. The Chechens’ attempt to secede from Russia actually began several years earlier, but it was not until 1994 that large-scale violence broke out over this effort to secede. A full-blown war to stop this secession soon broke out. This war soon became unpopular throughout Russia. Partly as a result of this the Russian government signed an agreement with the Chechens that gave Chechnya broad autonomy from Russia and the promise of a referendum on independence in five-year’s time.

This agreement collapsed in 1999 after a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and St. Petersburg which the Russians blamed on the Chechens. Also in that year, Dagestan began to make moves towards independence and the Russians accused the Chechens of allowing the Dagestani rebels to use Chechnya—which was not fully under Moscow’s control—as a base for the formation of violent, pro-Dagestani-independence militias. As a result of this, Russia’s new president, Vladimir Putin (Владимир Путин), soon sent Russian forces into Chechnya and a second war broke out. Although the Russians also suffered a number of casualties in this second war, this time the Russian public was far more supportive of the war effort.

In the last few years, the Russians have been able to largely crush the Chechen uprising. Consequently, Chechnya has been able to rebuild and the situation there has begun to improve, as the Russians have been quick to point out. It is therefore uncertain whether the Chechens would wish to attempt to secede again, even if other parts of the Caucuses are permitted to secede from their respective states. There is obviously, though, no certainty with regards to this matter.

B North Ossetia (Северная Осетия in Russian and

Цӕгат Ирыстон/ Tsægat Iryston in Ossetian)

As was mentioned in this essay, South Ossetia is a frozen conflict located in the Republic of Georgia that has recently flared up again. By contrast, North Ossetia has managed to remain relatively calm, although it is important to mention that the Beslan (Беслан) school massacre at the hands of Chechen terrorists occurred in North Ossetia.

Although many Ossetians dream of a united, independent Ossetian state, North Ossetia has yet to make any serious moves towards independence. This is in spite of the fact that North Ossetia is by far the larger and more important of the two Ossetias. Likewise, the Ossetians have lived in North Ossetia for far longer than they have lived in South Ossetia. North Ossetia would therefore almost certainly have to be the more important part of any independent Ossetian state. North Ossetia seems highly unlikely to seek independence unless perhaps South Ossetia were to gain independence first. Part of the reason for this is that Russia has been supportive of South Ossetia’s efforts to secede from Georgia.

C Dagestan

Dagestan is the Russian republic that is most likely to attempt to secede. Indeed, Dagestan is, at this point and time, more likely to attempt to secede than Chechnya, now that Chechnya is improving after having suffered from two destructive wars.

Dagestan is probably the most linguistically diverse place in all of Russia, as there are approximately 30 different languages spoken in Dagestan. However, nearly all of these languages come from the Dagestani branch of the Caucasian language family and are therefore related to each other. There are also some languages of Turkic Altaic origin that are present in Dagestan as well. The term “Dagestani” can be used either to refer to all of these peoples living in Dagestan or to only the Caucasian-speaking peoples living in Dagestan.

The one thing that the various peoples of Dagestan have in common is religion, namely Islam. Islamic leaders have traditionally been quite influential in Dagestan throughout history and remain so in the present. Indeed, local Islamic leaders often have more influence than the central Russians authorities have.

Sporadic violence has plagued Dagestan since the late 1990s. Indeed, it has been said that Dagestan is the most lawless and the most dangerous place in the whole of the Russian Federation. While there has been some agitation for independence, it must be stated that the Muslim political leadership of Dagestan remains loyal to Russia. However, if parts of the Caucuses were allowed to secede from their respective states, then perhaps Dagestan would try to do the same. Nonetheless, even if Dagestan were to successfully secede from Russia, it is not clear whether all of the diverse linguistic groups in Dagestan would ultimately be able to remain together in a single, united state.

D Ingushetia (Ингушетия in Russian and ГІалгІай Мохк in Ingush)

Ingushetia is a small republic in the Northern Caucuses that sits in between Chechnya and North Ossetia. The Ingushetians are a Caucasian people whose language is closely related to the Chechen language. In fact, the Ingushetians and the Chechens are so similar that they have often been considered to be the same ethnic group. As a result, the Ingushetians and the Chechens were joined together into the same republic within the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic in the 1930s. In 1992 the Ingushetians petitioned the Russian government to make Ingushetia a separate republic within the Russian Federation; the central Russian government agreed to this. As is also the case with the Chechens, the Ingushetians are a predominately Muslim people.

The Russians took control of Ingushetia early in the nineteenth century. Unlike the Chechens, the Ingushetians did not resist the Russian conquerors very much. The Ingushetians were—like the Chechens—expelled from the Northern Caucuses to Asia by Stalin after the Second World War, since Stalin believed that the Ingushetians had collaborated with the Nazi German invaders. The Ingushetians were allowed to return home by Khrushchev in 1957.

More recently the Ingushetians have had disputes not with the Russians but with other ethnic nationalities in the Northern Caucuses. The biggest conflict that the Ingushetians have recently had has been with the Ossetians. When the Ingushetians were expelled from the Caucasus region, the Ossetians were able to take over some of their land. The Ingushetians claim that some of the eastern parts of North Ossetia should be in Ingushetia. The Ingushetians have even tried to partially lay claim to North Ossetia’s capital, as it had been a shared capital until the 1930s. These disputes with the Ossetians have periodically turned violent, especially in the early 1990s.

Basically, even though the Ingushetians are the closest relatives of the Chechens—the only ethnic group to have actually attempted to secede from the Russian Federation—the Ingushetians themselves have so far not shown much interest in the idea of secession. This is in keeping with history over the last two centuries as the Chechens have always fiercely resisted Russian rule whereas the Ingushetians have always been much more submissive. However, should Chechnya ever manage to secede from Russia, it is possible that the Ingushetians will then gain an interest in secession.

E Tatarstan[[13]](#footnote-13) (Татарстан)

As was previously mentioned, the Tatars are the largest non-Slavic people living within the Russian Federation, as the Tatars form 4% of Russia’s population[[14]](#footnote-14). The Tatars are a Turkic Altaic-speaking people. The Tatar language is written using the Cyrillic alphabet. In terms of religion, the Tatars are predominately Muslim, although there is a small Orthodox Christian minority amongst the Tatars.

Tatarstan is a republic that sits just west of the Ural Mountains, which would technically place it in Europe. Tatarstan is, however, more Middle Eastern than European. It is important to note that there are a number of Tatars that are living in others parts of Russia. Tatarstan is land-locked and does not share a common border with any independent state. However, this has not stopped the Tatars in their desire for independence:

On 31 August 1990, the then Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shamiyev (elected President of the Republic in 1991), declared Tatarstan a sovereign republic. As President, Shamiyev continued to strive for the Republic’s independence from the Federation Government. Apart from secessionist Chechnya, Tatarstan was the only republic to reject the Federation Treaty and adopted its own Constitution on 6 November 1992…On 15 February 1994 Shamiyev won important concessions from Russia’s central Government by signing a treaty which ceded extensive powers to Tatarstan, including full ownership rights over its petroleum reserves and industrial companies, the right to retain most of its tax revenue…and the right to pursue its own foreign-trade policy. It was also allowed to retain its Constitution. The division of responsibilities was confirmed by treaty with the Federation in 1995.

In December 1995 the local success of the federal pro-government party, Our Home is Russia, in elections to the Federal Assembly, indicated the extent of co-operation between the national and republican ruling groups. In a [March 24, 1996] presidential election…[Shamiyev] was re-elected, winning some 93% of the votes cast. Tatarstan became a model for other territories seeking greater autonomy and economic security. On 28 August 1997 the Presidents of the Republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan signed a treaty on co-operation at the second World Congress of Tatars, held in Kazan [Казан]. The Congress adopted a resolution praising the development of Tatarstan into a ‘new kind of sovereign state’. (Europa Publications, 1999, p99)

As of now, it seems unlikely that Tatarstan will attempt to secede from Russia. For one thing, Tatarstan (even if it were to secede with its neighboring republics) would be an enclaved state within Russia. However, this situation could change if other Russian republics were able to secede from Russia.

VII Bosnia and Herzegovina (Босна и Херцеговина/Bosna i Hercegovina)

Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the six republics that formed the old Yugoslavia. Bosnia and Herzegovina was the third Yugoslavian republic (after Slovenia and Croatia) to declare independence from Yugoslavia. Bosnia and Herzegovina is, however, far more of an ethnically[[15]](#footnote-15) mixed state than either Slovenia or Croatia. The ethnic composition of Bosnia and Herzegovina stands at 40% Muslim, 31% Orthodox Christian, and 15% Catholic[[16]](#footnote-16). Indeed, the Bosnian Muslims—the largest ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina—are (as one can see) merely a plurality of the Bosnian population, as no one ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina has a majority of the population. In fact, if one were to add the Croatian and Serbian populations together as fellow Christians, the Bosnian Muslims would actually be a minority group within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Largely as a result of these ethnic divisions, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was particularly brutal. In fact, it was Europe’s most brutal war since World War Two. Indeed, this war included such things as massacres and mass graves. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended with a peace agreement that was agreed to in Dayton, Ohio, USA on November 21, 1995 and was formally signed in Paris, France on December 14, 1995.

Under the terms of the peace agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina was turned into a two-part federation. The first part of the federation is itself a federation between the Croatians and the Muslims. The other part of the federation is the Serbian part, known as “Republika Srpska”. There has been periodic talk of dividing the Croat-Muslim federation into two different parts, the result of which would be to turn Bosnia and Herzegovina into a three-part federation. It is worth noting that many of the ethnic Croatians in Bosnia and Herzegovina have dual citizenship with Croatia. Likewise, in some Croat-dominated parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina the Croatian Koruna is the dominate currency in use.

Each of the two parts of the federation has its own president, parliament, and police force. The federal institutions largely run foreign policy only. The presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina rotates between the three different groups.

Many of the ethnic Serbians and ethnic Croatians living within Bosnia and Herzegovina would prefer that their land be attached to Serbia Proper and Croatia Proper, respectively. So far, these two groups have been relatively content with the status quo. However, many of the Bosnian Serbs are of the opinion that if the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo are allowed to secede from Serbia against Serbian objections (which is what has basically happened) then they should be allowed to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Allowing the Bosnian Serbs to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and to join Serbia Proper could be seen as some form compensation for losing Kosovo.

However, if the Bosnian Serbs are allowed to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and to join Serbia Proper, then surly the Bosnian Croats would also want to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and to join Croatia Proper. Should both of these groups be allowed to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina, then Bosnia and Herzegovina would become a much smaller state. Likewise, Bosnia and Herzegovina would become divided into two separate parts, as the Bihać Pocket in the north of the state would become detached from what would be left of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is for these reasons that the international community would undoubtedly be reluctant to allow Republika Srpska to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, if the Bosnian Serbs were to declare independence from Bosnia and Herzegovina, it would then be difficult to stop this secession if the government of Serbia Proper were to back the Bosnian Serbs in their secession efforts. However, Serbia Proper might be reluctant to do so, as doing so would hurt its chances of joining the European Union.

VIII Kurdistan

Kurdistan (as everyone knows) is not a reference to an independent state but rather the regions of the world which are either majority Kurdish in their ethnic make-up or regions that could perhaps be claimed by a potential Kurdish state, should one ever emerge. The Kurds (with over 20 million people) are the largest stateless nation on the face of the Earth. The regions which would most likely be used to create an independent Kurdish state mostly lie in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran with smaller areas in Syria and Armenia. As one can imagine, these states—especially Turkey—strongly oppose losing any territory to a potential Kurdish state.

The Kurds are an Indo-European people whose language comes from the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. The Kurdish language is closely related to the Persian language in Iran. Kurdish has been written with three different alphabets throughout its history: the Arabic alphabet, the Latin alphabet, and the Cyrillic alphabet. The alphabet that is used by the Kurds is often based on the alphabet that the dominant ethnic group in the state in which they live uses. As a result, the Kurds tend to use the Latin alphabet in Turkey and the Arabic alphabet in Iran and Iraq.

In terms of religion the Kurds are predominately Muslim. There is, however, a small Yezidi[[17]](#footnote-17) minority amongst the Kurds, especially amongst the Kurds in Armenia. The Yezidi religion is a small monotheistic religion that is related to both Christianity and Islam.

As of now the world community has been reluctant to support the Kurds in their desire to create their own state. This is in spite of the fact that the Kurds have suffered a large amount of oppression at the hands of the Turks, the Iranians, and the Arabs who dominate in the states in which they live. However, there is now a strong possibility that the Kurds in Northern Iraq may try to declare independence from Iraq, especially if Kosovo’s declaration of independence were to become a precedent.

It is difficult to judge what the world community’s reaction would be to a declaration of independence on the part of the Kurds in Northern Iraq. For one thing, it is difficult to argue that the Kurds in Iraq have not suffered oppression at the hands of the Arab-dominated Iraqi government. Indeed, the oppression of the Kurds in Iraq even included suffering an attack with chemical weapons at the hands of the Iraqi government in 1988. However, the Iraqis could argue that the oppression that the Kurds suffered was carried out by a previous Iraqi regime that will never again be in power. The current Iraqi government could try to argue that the Kurds’ claim to independence based on oppression is no longer valid. Nevertheless, the fact that the oppression of the Kosovar Albanians was carried out by a previous Serbian regime was not given much importance when Kosovo sought and obtained recognition of its declaration of independence from major states such as the US and the UK.

While it may be difficult to predict how the international community would react to a declaration of independence by the Kurds in Northern Iraq in general, there is no doubt that there would be some states that would definitely be opposed to this. The most obvious example of a state that would strongly be opposed to a Kurdish declaration of independence in Northern Iraq would be Turkey. Turkey is the state that contains both the largest share of the Kurdish population and the largest share of land that could be used to create an independent Kurdish state. As a result, Turkey would stand to lose the most with regards to the potential creation of an independent Kurdish state. Turkey (as one can imagine) is strongly opposed to seeing Kurdish-dominated Northern Iraq become independent, as that would certainly encourage the Kurds in Turkey to declare independence from Turkey and to join the Kurds of Northern Iraq. However, since the Turks have engaged in recent oppression of the Kurds—both in Turkey and in Iraq—the Kurds could make the case that they are entitled to secession.

Turkish opposition to Kurdish independence could be significant in that Turkey is a member of NATO and Turkey is a key ally of a number of important states, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. There are several reasons why Turkey is such a key ally of states such as the United States. First of all, Turkey was the world’s first secular Muslim state. Indeed, Turkey may very well still be the world’s only secular Muslim state, though other Muslim states such as Azerbaijan could also claim to be secular. In addition to being the world’s most (or at least one of the most) secular Muslim states, Turkey is also probably the strongest democracy in the Muslim world. Western states such as the United States hope that a secular Muslim democracy could serve as a model for the entire Muslim world. Also, Turkey sits at a significant strategic point on the globe, as Turkey lies at the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, and Turkey controls the Bosporus Strait. Turkey also has history on its side, as Turkey was an important member of NATO throughout the Cold War.

It is important to remember that in the case of Iraq, it is not just the Kurds in the north that may attempt to secede; the Shiite Arabs in the south (despite being the majority population of Iraq) may also want to secede from Iraq. In that sense, Iraq could split into three separate states, thereby facilitating the beginnings of an independent Kurdish state.

In the case of Turkey, it seems logical that Turkey would have the least right to object to an independent Kurdistan, as Turkey has been one of the biggest oppressors of the Kurds, both in Turkey and in Iraq. An independent Kurdish state in what had previously been Northern Iraq would therefore have an easier time trying to claim the eastern parts of Turkey for itself. As for Iran—a state in which the Kurds form 7% of the population—a lot depends on whether the current regime falls. It is difficult to imagine secession from Iran under the current regime. In short, any attempt at creating an independent Kurdish state would almost certainly have to begin with Northern Iraq.

In addition to the argument of previous oppression, the Kurds could also point to the fact that they—unlike the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo—do not have a nation-state of their own to which they could move. In that sense, one could make the argument that the Kurds are more entitled to secession than are the Kosovar Albanians.

IX Conclusions on Other Break-away Regions

As one can see, Kosovo is not the only place in Europe that is trying to secede from the state to which it is legally attached. One can also see that Russia—in contrast to its position on Kosovo—supports the secessionist element in four of Europe’s other five frozen conflicts. After all, in three of these four cases Russia could potentially absorb the break-away territory in question. Now that it appears as if Russia has been unable to stop the secession of Kosovo using the argument of Serbia’s territorial integrity, it is possible that Russia will try to use Kosovo as a precedent in favor of secession in Europe’s other frozen conflicts. Indeed, Russia has already recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as being independent states.

However, the Russians should be somewhat careful when it comes to pushing for the independence of these areas as there are parts of Russia that may also be interested in secession. Indeed, one place—Chechnya—has already attempted to secede. Furthermore, Russia’s support of South Ossetia’s effort to secede from Georgia could particularly backfire as this might encourage North Ossetia to then try to secede from Russia. Likewise, although the Chechen conflict may have largely died out, it could easily return should secessionist fever reach other Muslim areas of Russia’s Northern Caucasus region. In many ways there are already signs that this could be happening in Dagestan. Although the preceding review only focused on five different Russian republics, it is possible that there are other republics in Russia that could be interested in secession should some of the five previously-discussed republics be able to secede from Russia.

The state that may face the strongest possibility of secession as a result of Kosovo’s secession from Serbia is Bosnia and Herzegovina, a state that does not even have a frozen conflict. The reason for this is that many of the ethnic Serbians in Bosnia and Herzegovina never really wanted to be a part of that state and would instead prefer to join their fellow Serbians in Serbia Proper. These Bosnian Serbs could use the argument that if the Kosovar Albanians could be allowed to secede from a state to which they felt no loyalty then they (the Bosnian Serbs) should also be allowed to have the same ability. Besides, the Bosnian Serbs could argue that giving Republika Srpska to Serbia could be a way to compensate Serbia for its loss of Kosovo.

In the end, it appears as if Eastern Europe may be going through a second period of disintegration. It is interesting to note that there had not been any official secession anywhere in Eastern Europe from 1993—when the Czech Republic and Slovakia separated—until 2006 when Montenegro dissolved its union with Serbia. While it seems certain that there will not be any further disintegration within any of the 10 Eastern European states which have already joined both NATO and the European Union, the same thing certainly cannot be said about any of the remaining Eastern European states, both Western Balkan and former Soviet. While the case of Montenegro was straightforward (as the possible secession of Montenegro had been agreed to by both the Serbians and the Montenegrins in a 2003 treaty) the same is definitely not true of Kosovo’s recent secession from Serbia, as the Serbians were clearly against this and have still not agreed to recognize Kosovo’s independence. As the preceding review demonstrated, Kosovo’s forced secession from Serbia could prove to be a catalyst for a number of other areas in the Western Balkans and former Soviet Union. It was incredibly naïve of the supporters of Kosovo’s independence to believe that their argument that Kosovo is a unique case would stick. For one thing, it isn’t even true; there is nothing unique about Kosovo. Even if it were, the backers of other break-away regions are certain to disagree.

Ultimately, whatever the outcome of these various secessions attempts and possible secession attempts, what is needed most is for these frozen conflicts to become settled once and for all. Only after that can these areas become fully connected to the rest of Europe and the process of European integration can be completed and these areas (along with the surrounding areas) can finally move beyond these disputes.

One final note: the international community is going to have to start showing some consistency with regards to the dichotomy between self-determination and territorial integrity, all the while remembering that both concepts are important and showing consistency does not meaning favoring one of the two all of the time.

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1. In this essay, “desire for independence” refers not only to provinces that wish to become independent states but also to provinces that wish to leave their current state and join a different, already established state. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some of the following provinces such as Kurdistan are not really in Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was written in 1988 when the Soviet Union was in its final years. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some of these requests were initiated by Nagorno-Karabakh whereas others were initiated by Armenia. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Source: the BBC [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The term “Georgia Proper” is being used to distinguish the rest of Georgia from the two break-away regions. The use of this term should not be seen as definite support for the independence of these two regions; the aim here is to be neutral. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is important to remember that some of the names of Russian territorial units have alternative spellings in the Latin alphabet. In some cases there are alternative names. The alternative names of Russian territorial units shall be noted when they occur. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Unless otherwise noted, all population percentages contained in this segment come from the 1989 census that was taken in the then Russian Republic of the Soviet Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It is debatable as to whether Kalmykia is truly located within the Caucasus region [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some linguists consider the Uralic language family and the Altaic language family to be two parts of a greater “Uralo-Altaic” language family. In this essay, the two have been treated as being two different language families. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Source: The *2011 World Almanac* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Ethnic minorities” in this sense is a reference to anyone living within the Russian Federation who is not an ethnic Russian. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. There are alternative spellings for “Tatarstan”. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Source: The *2011 World Almanac* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The term “ethnic” is being used here with regards to differences between Croatians, Bosnians, and Serbians even though the differences between these three groups is much more religious rather than ethnic. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Source: The *2011 World Almanac* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There are alternative spellings for the Yezidi religion. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)