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### **Kosovo independence a touchy issue for Canada**

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Canwest News Service

UNITED NATIONS — Canada remained on the fence Monday as the United States led Western recognition of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia, and Russia opposed it.

Apart from sensitivity over the historical standoff with Quebec separatists, there was rising concern in Ottawa that the declaration has provoked the beginnings of a major East-West split.

There were also signs of instability in Serbia's neighbour Bosnia as the opposition Bosnian Serb party called for independence of the Serb-run half of that country, citing Kosovo as a regional precedent.

The Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying it was "assessing the situation" while, at the United Nations, Canada monitored a crisis meeting of the Security Council on the subject. At the meeting, Serb President Boris Tadic warned of "catastrophic consequences" if Kosovo's move is not reversed.

"If you cast a blind eye to this illegal act, who guarantees to you that parts of your countries will not declare independence in the same illegal way?" he said.

"There are dozens of various Kosovos in the world and all of them lie in wait for Kosovo's act of secession to become a reality and to become established as an acceptable norm."

The UN has run Kosovo since a NATO bombing campaign — in which Canada participated — forced Serbia to withdraw its forces from the region almost a decade ago. NATO acted to end a brutal crackdown ordered by then-Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic on the ethnic-Albanian majority in Kosovo, then a province of the Republic of Serbia.

Tadic said his country was now a "fully democratic" country, and would not seek to reclaim Kosovo through force. But he added Serbia "would never" recognize Kosovo independence.

Serbs consider Kosovo an important part of their cultural and religious heritage, but the ethnic-Albanian community rebuffed UN efforts to broker a deal whereby the Serb province would have been granted "supervised" independence.

The decision Sunday to break away from Serbia was approved unanimously by the 109 deputies present in the Kosovo Parliament Sunday — but 11 Serb deputies representing Kosovo's Serb minority boycotted the proceeding.

The parliamentarians had been emboldened by all-but-public declarations in recent months that the United States and other leading Western powers would quickly endorse the move.

But at least five of the European Union's 27 member states that have separatists within their borders are, like Canada, withholding their immediate recognition.

This is despite EU agreement to deploy a 1,900-strong team of administrative experts to take over from the UN's role in helping manage the fledgling state.

The five are Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. Some 16,000 NATO troops will also remain in Kosovo for now.

Russia is lined up behind the Serb position in part out of traditional Slavic solidarity, but also because it too is faced with strong separatist movements that could be encouraged to try to break away.

Former Russian ambassador to Canada, Vitaly Churkin, told Canwest News Service that all governments should pay heed to Kosovo's move.

"I think it is a message for everybody," said Churkin, now Russia's ambassador to the UN. "It certainly would apply to a number of situations and it is already impacting those situations in some of the areas close to us."

From Quebec City, the Parti Quebecois announced it will watch with interest when and how Canada reacts to Kosovo's independence declaration.

"Quebecers continue to support in a significant way the idea of Quebec, like Kosovo, obtaining political sovereignty, PQ international relations spokesman **Daniel Turp** said in a statement.

On tour in Africa, U.S. President George W. Bush took the lead in offering diplomatic backing to Kosovo, saying in an interview with NBC television's Today program that the Kosovars are now independent.

Britain and France moved quickly in the same direction.

The Department of Foreign Affairs statement said Canada has "consistently supported UN efforts to broker a peaceful solution" and encouraged "all sides to remain calm."

Academics say Quebec sovereigntists can claim little legitimacy from Kosovo's independence movement, which gained Western sympathy during the civil war, which claimed 10,000 lives.

"The situations are really apples and oranges, said University of Toronto political scientist Robert Austin.

Canada's Supreme Court, in a landmark 1998 ruling on Quebec secession, said the right to unilaterally declare independence is only an option for a people facing oppression or exploitation from a colonial master, and denied any meaningful self-determination.