

How to Start Your Own Country in Four Easy Steps

Step 1: Make sure you are eligible

As tempting as it might be to declare your cubicle a sovereign state, customary international law actually does specify minimum standards for statehood.

You must have a defined territory. You must have a permanent population. You must have a government. Your government must be capable of interacting with other states. (This one is somewhat controversial. It was included as a qualification in [the 1933 Montevideo Convention](#), which established the United States good neighbor policy of nonintervention in Latin America, but is generally not recognized as international law.)

Step 2: Declare independence

Congratulations on joining the ranks of Transnistria, Somaliland, and a host of other countries that won't be marching at the Olympics anytime soon. Just because you've met the qualifications and declared yourself independent doesn't mean that you're going to be taken seriously. Even the [Principality of Sealand](#) located on a 10,000-square-foot platform in the North Sea has tried with mixed success to claim sovereignty under these qualifications.

However, now that your state is established, there are certain benefits you can expect, even if you're not recognized by anyone. Once an entity has

established itself as a de facto state, it will benefit from territorial integrity and certain guarantees of sovereignty, says Stefan Talmon, professor of public international law at Oxford University and author of *Recognition in International Law*. For instance, now that Kosovo is established as a state, Serbia can no longer freely attack it to bring it back into Serbia. It benefits from the prohibition of the use of force under the U.N. Charter. These rules were established during the Cold War to protect new states that were not yet recognized by one bloc or another.

Step 3: Get recognized

There's not much point in having your own country unless other countries acknowledge your existence. International recognition is what gives a country legitimacy in the international community and what ultimately distinguishes the New Zealands of the world from the Nagorno-Karabakhs. Naturally, though, the established countries are going to take some convincing. Recognition is quite complicated because it combines international law and international politics, Talmon says. Some people say that recognition is a purely political act. It is at the discretion of existing states whether they recognize, so there is no right to recognition.

This was especially true during the Cold War, when the national legitimacy of North and South Vietnam, North and South Korea, and East and West Germany depended on which side you asked. Even today, a number of entities are recognized as states by some countries, but not by others. Palestine, Taiwan, and Northern Cyprus fall into this category.

The United States has no official policy on what is required for recognition,

according to its State Department. Instead, the decision to recognize a state is made by the president. Then the president decides whether to establish diplomatic relations with the state based on U.S. national interests. There's no cookie-cutter approach, so when you ask for recognition, be sure to explain how your independence will be good for America. In the old days, proving your anti-communist cred was usually good enough. Today, U.S. strategic priorities are a bit more complex, though as Kosovo proves, ticking off the Russians still helps.

Step 4: Join the club

Since its founding in 1945, membership in the United Nations has become the gold standard of international legitimacy. When you are admitted to the U.N, that's a form of approval, Talmon says. It's like a stamp [that says] you are now a full member of the international community.

Applying for U.N. membership is a breeze. According to [U.N. rules](#), all you need to do is write a letter to the secretary-general requesting membership. These letters are remarkably short and simple. For a handy template, check out the successful [application of Montenegro](#), the United Nations most recent member.

You can mail your application to:

Ban Ki-moon Secretary-General
The United Nations
First Ave. at 46th St.
New York, NY 10017

Now comes the hard part. The Security Council must refer you to the General Assembly, which must determine by a two-thirds majority that you are a peace-loving state that can carry out the duties of the [U.N. Charter](#).

Its probably not even worth trying this unless youve completed step 3. A number of unrecognized states have applied for U.N. recognition over the years, including American-Indian tribes, but without the credibility bestowed by bilateral recognition, these applications are usually just filed away.

The biggest obstacle to U.N. membership is power politics. Neither North nor South Korea got U.N. membership until 1991 because of vetoes by one bloc or another during the Cold War. Even today, Russias veto on the Security Council will probably prevent Kosovo from gaining a seat at the table anytime soon. The Republic of China, a.k.a. Taiwan, was one of the founding members of the United Nations and once had a permanent seat on the Security Council. But Taiwan was booted out in favor of the Peoples Republic of China in 1971, after U.S. President Richard Nixon decided to cozy up to Beijing. The Taiwanese government has applied for membership every year since 1993, but to no avail. The United Nations didnt even bother to open Taiwans most recent letter.

As you can see, the point at which a territory officially becomes a country is very much in the eyes of the beholder. International recognition can be an elusive prize. The good news? The longer you wait, the better your chances become. In international law, which is often based on custom, the longer you can maintain your de facto sovereignty, the more likely you are to be accepted. (Unless, of course, youre Taiwan.)

The strength of Kosovos bid for independence from Serbia is based largely on the fact that it has, for all intents and purposes, been independent for almost a decade. In a more extreme example, the 900-year-old Sovereign Order of Malta has diplomatic relations with 100 countries and observer status at the United Nations even though its entire territory is contained in a few buildings in Rome. So dont be discouraged. Starting your own country isnt impossible. Its just going to require a lot of patience and the right friends.