

US steps up push for Kosovo Independence

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The promise President George W. Bush made in June to Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha that Kosovo would be independent by the end of 2007 has polarised Europe and antagonised Russia.

A meeting in Portugal on September 7/8 attended by European Union foreign ministers tried to present a common front during talks on the province's status involving Kosovan Albanian and Serbian leaders. Most commentators believe the two sides will fail to reach an agreement by the December 10 deadline set by United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. Kosovan Prime Minister Agim Ceku and Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic said they doubt the talks will lead to a compromise settlement.

Ceku declared, "The only development I expect is the declaration and recognition of Kosovo's independence. This must happen immediately after December 10."

The United States has announced it would immediately recognise Kosovo, hoping that it will have pressured a "critical mass" of EU countries by then to come on board. The Kosovo government will then "invite" the EU to fulfil the central role envisaged in the "conditional independence" plan published by UN special envoy Martti Ahtisaari in February 2007. It will supervise the transition to full independence, send a 1,850-strong "rule of law mission"—the largest in EU history—to reform the police, prisons and judiciary, provide aid and offer the carrot of EU membership.

Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica has said Serbia will annul any unilateral proclamation of independence. He has demanded the US explain its support for Kosovo independence and urged the UN to take measures against what he called US "policies of force." He accused the West of trying to create a NATO statelet in Kosovo, and his Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) has removed membership in NATO from its election manifesto. According to UK professor and Balkan expert Mark Almond, the US and EU have been "surprised" by the unity shown by Kostunica and the more pro-Western President Boris Tadic and his Democrats (DS).

A declaration of independence could encourage further separatist sentiments, pogroms and bloodshed despite the US insistence that Kosovo independence is a "one-off" case. Serbia could claim a slice of northern Serb-dominated Kosovo, and the remaining half of Kosovo's 200,000 Serbs who live in scattered enclaves might be forced to move there. A raft of other separatist claims could follow, including from Albanians living in Macedonia and in the Presovo Valley in southern Serbia and Serbs living in the Republika Srpska region of Bosnia. The Vojvodina Union of Socialists in Serbia's Vojvodina province where many ethnic Hungarians live is again calling for increased autonomy and "demanding" that Vojvodina be given equal status in a "federal Serbia."

The dangers were highlighted by Dr. Jonathan Eyal, an analyst at the UK's Royal United Services Institute, who said a "large number" of EU member states oppose a unilateral declaration of independence, which would be another breach of international law similar to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999.

Luis Amado of Portugal, which holds the rotating EU presidency, warned the European foreign ministers meeting that maintaining the bloc's unity on the issue was "key to the credibility of Europe's foreign policy."

"I cannot conceive that we could have at the end a situation where there is a strong position of Russia, a strong position of the United States, and where Europe simply does not exist," Amado added.

The EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, reiterated Amado's concerns, saying Kosovo was a European question and the EU had to remain united. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner added, "Europe's unity is more important than the fate of Kosovo.... In seeking a solution for Kosovo's status, we should look to find an outcome that would satisfy all sides, and respect Russia's position."

Amado admitted he did not know how each member state will respond if an agreement is not reached by December 10. Any member state has the right to veto EU foreign policy resolutions.

Within the EU, Britain and France are most prepared to recognise Kosovan independence. Germany's position is less certain, as there is more pressure domestically not to stay in the NATO-led force in Kosovo without a new UN mandate. Spain, Hungary, Greece, Slovakia, Cyprus and Romania are the most reluctant because of either ties to Serbia or fears that it could encourage a wave of separatism in their own countries.

Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis said Serbia must agree to any agreement on Kosovo, adding, "There are no solutions which can be imposed from above. Any solution must be accepted—or at least tolerated—by all sides." Slovakia and Romania are concerned that Kosovan independence would set a precedent for their large ethnic Hungarian populations, and Spain has similar concerns regarding Catalonia and the Basque Country.

Russia is threatened by the US-led drive for Kosovo's independence. Kosovo became the subject of a bitter public clash between the US and Russia in the run-up to G8 summit, reflecting a growing and multifaceted confrontation between the US, which is asserting its power in former Soviet republics and spheres of influence, and a Russian regime, encouraged by rising oil revenues and the crisis in Iraq, seeking to realise its own aspirations as a regional and world power.

Russia has refused to accept any settlement of Kosovo's status that is not approved by Serbia and rejects the December 10 deadline.

The latest round of talks was initiated after Western powers attempted to push through Kosovan independence at the UN Security Council on July 20, believing Russia would eventually agree to the rescinding of Resolution 1244 under which Kosovo has been administered as a UN protectorate while still recognising Serbia's sovereignty over the province.

US Secretary of State Nicholas Burns has stressed that the US sees Kosovo as part of wider strategic considerations in the Balkans, the Caucasus and the region around the Black and Caspian seas, where “much remains to be done” to support countries “resisting” Russia.

Russia has replied with President Vladimir Putin proclaiming it “natural that a resurgent Russia is returning there [to the Balkans]” and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stating that Kosovo is one of several “so-called ‘red line’ issues” for Russia where “we cannot fail to react and we must stick to our position to the end.”

Lavrov is demanding that the Western powers recognise Russia’s growing power, saying “perhaps it is time to think of a new definition of Atlanticism that does not exclude Russia” and involves “a triple understanding, between the United States, Russia, and the European Union” Such a “troika” could “steer the global boat into untroubled waters,” he added.

The current talks are already being overseen by a “Troika”—of envoys US Ambassador Frank Wisner, Aleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko for Russia and Wolfgang Ischinger—appointed by the Contact Group, made up of Russia, the US, the UK, France, Italy and Germany.

Wisner claimed it was up to the Kosovan Albanian and Serb leaders to decide their own future. “The Troika’s mandate is to encourage both sides to come up with their own ideas, as we are not going to suggest any of our own. At the end of the talks we will submit a report to the UN secretary general,” Wisner declared, adding incredulously, “All ideas are on the table. The Ahtisaari plan is there as well. Both sides are free to suggest ideas of their own. We are here to hear them out and take them into consideration.”

Although Wisner insisted that partition of Kosovo was not “an option,” Ischinger caused a storm by suggesting in early August it could be “if they want that.” Although Ischinger later denied talks on partition were taking place, in early September Maxime Verhagen, the Dutch foreign minister, became the first EU minister to mention partition publicly.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial called on the US administration not to waver and give Serbia “a stark choice: a future in league with Russia, or the EU and NATO.” It continued, “Caught between a pushy Kremlin, weak-kneed Europe and otherwise-occupied Washington, the Kosovars are being denied their happy ending” and demanded “the US forcefully steps in to usher this province of two million to independence without any messy compromises.”

The International Crisis Group—an organisation of former and current CEOs, diplomats and politicians including Ahtisaari himself—are pressing the EU to use the “breathing space” offered by the talks to set up “a coalition of willing states” that would also recognise a unilateral proclamation of Kosovan independence and prevent the discrediting of the EU’s foreign policy and “its efforts to project itself as a credible international actor in conflicts elsewhere.”

This is the sort of language that could lead to war.

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