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Independence for Kosovo is off the agenda, envoy reveals

By Anne Penketh, The Independent

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The international community is backing away from a clear endorsement of independence for Kosovo. According to the top European negotiator, Kosovo is no longer being offered internationally-supervised independence from Serbia, in an apparent concession to Belgrade and Moscow that is likely to infuriate the disputed province's ethnic Albanian majority.

The envoy, Wolfgang Ischinger, who is the German ambassador to the UK and will be involved in separate talks in London today and tomorrow with a Serbian and a Kosovo delegation, said that it was time to get away from "labels" in order to achieve a "realistic" solution for Kosovo which has been administered by the UN for the past eight years since Nato's bombing campaign forced Serbia's withdrawal from the province in 1999. The Kosovo delegation, whose leaders are threatening to unilaterally declare independence, wants the London talks to focus on "technical issues between two independent states," the Kosovo Prime Minister, Agim Ceku, said yesterday before leaving Pristina.

But Mr Ischinger said: "The label is worth nothing. Where are they going to get their income from? They would continue to rely on foreign aid."

Asked whether the ultimate outcome of the latest negotiations could be internationally-supervised independence, Mr Ischinger replied: "I would say that we will try to reach a status solution which will provide for an internationally-supervised status for Kosovo. I would leave open independence. I would rather talk about a strong supervised status."

However he added that talks so far with Serbia – which strongly rejects an outcome of self rule for Kosovo – and the ethnic Albanian delegation had "made some progress, drawing both parties away from the label. Independence versus autonomy is a gap which cannot be bridged if you look at the fine print. International supervision is accepted."

Mr Ischinger also indicated that his "troika" of negotiators, including a US and a Russian diplomat, had given further ground by agreeing to a Serbian demand that the plan drawn up by former Finnish president Marti Ahtisaari would not form the basis for the talks. "I would not insist on the Ahtisaari package, but it's not off the table," he said.



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Russia stymied US and European attempts to endorse Mr Ahtisaari's plan, providing for de facto independence for Kosovo under EU supervision but guaranteeing the rights of the Serb minority, by threatening to veto the settlement at the UN and demanding further negotiations. The UN Security Council has set a deadline of 10 December for the "troika" to submit a final status report to the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon. The incentive for both sides to reach an agreement would be future membership of the European Union. Serbia is close to signing a stabilisation and association agreement with the EU marking its first step towards membership, but the move is conditional on Belgrade handing over the indicted suspect General Ratko Mladic to the UN war crimes tribunal.