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Drifting from promise of independence

By Mark Tran, The Guardian

http://www.guardian.co.uk/Kosovo/Story/0,,2172568,00.html#article_continue

Once seen as inevitable, Kosovo's separation from Serbia now seems a fading prospect

The Serbian foreign minister had good reason to sound relaxed and confident during an appearance before the media and foreign policy experts in London this week.

Vuk Jeremic, who was in Britain for the latest round of diplomacy on Kosovo, and the government in Belgrade are sitting pretty because the prospect of independence for the Serbian province, once apparently a certainty, is receding fast.

It appears now that Kosovo, which has been administered by the UN for the past eight years since a Nato bombing campaign forced Serbia's withdrawal in 1999, will remain in political limbo.

The fear is that simmering tensions will boil over into violence as Kosovans see the promise of independence snatched away.

For the Albanians, who make up 90% of Kosovo's population of 2 million, the whole episode has been a diplomatic disaster. The Kosovan prime minister, Agim Ceku, who was in London today to see a "troika" of envoys from the US, Russia and the EU, has lost all political credibility at home after putting his trust in the west - particularly the US - to deliver the prize of independence.

The latest blow to Mr Ceku came from Wolfgang Ischinger, the top EU negotiator and the German ambassador to the UK. In an interview with the Independent, he seemed to sharply pull the rug from under the feet of the Kosovan leadership.

"I would leave open independence. I would rather talk about a strong supervised status," he said.

Analysts say the remarks have had a dreadful impact and will reinforce fears among a growing number of Albanians that they have been led down the garden path by their western "friends".

All this seems a very long way from the upbeat predictions from US officials at the start of the year, culminating in a pledge by George Bush in June.



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During a visit to Albania, where he received a hero's welcome, the US president backed the goal of independence for Kosovo and said the matter would be put before the UN security council, along the lines of a plan drawn up by the former Finnish president Marti Ahtisaari.

The resolution never saw the light of day, shelved repeatedly because of Russia, which has chosen Kosovo as one of the fields in which to flex its new diplomatic muscle.

At the G8 meeting in Germany in July, the west refused to call Russia's bluff and France muddied the waters by proposing more time for more talks. This is not what Mr Ahtisaari would have predicted when he went to Belgrade in 2005 and told the Serbian government that Kosovo's independence was inevitable.

This week's discussions between the troika and, separately, Serbian and Albanian leaders in London are a prelude to the first face-to-face talks between the two parties, scheduled for September 28 in New York on the margins of the UN assembly. The troika is due to report back to the UN by December 10, when the west says a decision must be taken.

But the December deadline is likely to come and go without a diplomatic resolution any closer. The west has lost the stomach for this particular fight. After sounding so gung-ho on independence for Kosovo, the Bush administration has other more pressing worries - Iraq, Iran, the Middle East - and seems no longer willing to take on the Kremlin over the issue.

In Britain, another strong advocate of independence, a changing of the guard has not worked to Kosovo's advantage. Tony Blair, for whom Kosovo was a test case for liberal interventionism, is gone and the old Kosovo hands at the Foreign Office are also moving on.

The 27-member EU is divided: Spain, Hungary, Greece, Slovakia, Cyprus and Romania are among those against independence, either because of their proximity to the Balkans or due to fears that it could encourage separatists within their own borders. With EU unity now at stake, Britain will be reluctant to press for independence as it would shatter a common position.

As political paralysis persists in the west, Kosovo is likely to drift into partition, with the Serbs in northern Kosovo looking to Belgrade, and the area increasingly becoming a no-go area for the Albanian majority. Meanwhile, Albanians will chafe at being stuck in an international no man's land, raising the risk that Nato soldiers or international officials will become targets of Albanian frustration.



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Publicly, Belgrade rejects partition, as Mr Jeremic again asserted yesterday at the Chatham House foreign affairs thinktank. But that is politically more acceptable than independence.

The best outcome for stability in the west Balkans is for the EU to recognise Kosovo, at once releasing all of the frustration felt by the Albanian population. The EU would also be doing Belgrade a favour - although Serbian politicians would never admit it openly - as it would take a festering problem off their hands. But the indications are that the EU will fail to meet what it has described as its biggest challenge.