



KOSOVO

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Fretting

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Kosovo should be abuzz. A general election is due on November 17th. Soon afterwards Kosovo's Albanians (Kosovars) hope to declare independence, becoming the seventh country to emerge from the wreckage of Yugoslavia. Yet gloom hangs over the province, under United Nations jurisdiction since the end of the war in 1999. Too many promises have been broken for the Kosovars, who account for 90% of Kosovo's 2m population, to buzz.

The election will change little. None of the parties has any policies beyond independence. They are based on personalities and quarrels over who did what in the war. It will be, sighs a source close to government, “only a reshuffling of the pack”. There is a wild card, in the shape of Behgjet Pacolli. This Kosovar tycoon made his fortune as a builder in Russia and the former Soviet Union and has plastered Kosovo with posters of the Kremlin and other buildings he worked on, stating how many Kosovars he employed on each.

A troika of ambassadors from Russia, America and the European Union is holding talks between the Kosovars and Serbia, due to end on December 10th. After that, as there is unlikely to be a deal, the Kosovars want to declare independence. But a declaration will be worthless unless many countries, especially in the EU, recognise it.

With holidays and time needed to form a government, little will happen until early next year. Then Kosovar leaders fear that there may be calls for yet another round of diplomacy. They are nervous of a repeat of the Balkan past. In 1878 Bosnia came under Austro-Hungarian rule, but with nominal sovereignty staying with the Ottomans. The Kosovars fear that, once the UN mission is replaced by an EU one, the big powers might press them to accept that, even if Kosovo begins acting as an independent state, Serbia should retain sovereignty at least for a few years.

Kosovo's leaders will not accept this. Ominously, one armed group has made a dramatic appearance on television. Albin Kurti, a former student leader under house arrest for leading a protest that turned violent, says that 2m people in Kosovo are, in effect, under house arrest. He argues against any further negotiations, since negotiations always aim at compromise—and Kosovo cannot compromise on independence.