



KOSOVO

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Quest for Kosovo compromise

By James Blitz, Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3452ac54-834e-11dc-b042-0000779fd2ac.html>

Wolfgang Ischinger, the German ambassador to London, could be forgiven for thinking of himself as the man at the centre of the diplomatic dispute over the future of Kosovo.

For the past four months, Mr Ischinger has been the European Union's representative on a "troika" of diplomats – from the EU, US and Russia – charged with resolving the stand-off over Kosovo. The talks have been gruelling, he concedes in an interview. But the "endgame" is approaching, he says. "We are entering the most critical phase."

To many, the Kosovo stand-off looks insoluble. Kosovo Albanians demand full independence but Belgrade insists the territory should merely enjoy a form of loose autonomy within Serbia. "If they stick to these initial positions there is no imaginable way you could forge agreement between them," Mr Ischinger says.

He still believes that a negotiated agreement can be reached before the troika is obliged to present its conclusions to the United Nations on December 10. But he insists this will happen only if the Serbs and Kosovo Albanians steel themselves for tough compromises to avoid disastrous failure.

"The two sides have to realise they cannot get 100 per cent of their demands. They have to realise that if they settle for just 50 per cent, it is a much more desirable outcome for both than no agreement at all."

The Kosovo stand-off has long been a diplomatic football between the US and Russia. The US has indicated it will recognise an independent Kosovo if the negotiations fail. Russia has stood firmly by its Serb ally.

In fact, says Mr Ischinger, Moscow and Washington have been more flexible than is sometimes suggested. Russia long insisted it was in no hurry to resolve the issue of Kosovo's status but, last month, Moscow signed up to a contact group statement that "a solution has to be found ... without delay".

Mr Ischinger also insists the US has a more nuanced approach than many think. "America's definition of independence is identical to the EU's definition: we are not thinking about independence as something unrestrained." Instead, Kosovo will



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continue to be “strongly supervised” by the presence of EU and Nato missions with the ultimate power to make decisions.

Compromises will have to be made if a political settlement is to be reached in the next 45 days.

“The leadership in Pristina understands that a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo is not good enough to lead them into paradise. They do not live on an island in the Pacific. Where will they be, for example, if – the day after independence – Serbia decides to close its border with Kosovo? This is why an agreement is important for Kosovo’s prosperity.

“Serbia must accept that eight years have gone by in which they’ve had no authority over Kosovo. The situation now is not one in which they can realistically expect that Kosovo will come back under their tutelage.”

Mr Ischinger hopes both sides have the will to reach a deal by December 10. But he is a realist. “A declaration of independence by Kosovo, without any accompanying agreement with Serbia, is a real possibility.”

His fear, shared by many, is that such an outcome would not heal the wounds of post-Yugoslavian conflict but would create a huge new burden for the EU.