



KOSOVO

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Kosovo's future uncertain as talks collapse

By Peter Popham, The Independent

Talks to find agreement on the future of Kosovo ended in failure yesterday with the Serbian and Albanian sides unable to hammer out a compromise. Mediators said the peace of the region was now at stake.

Three days of UN-sponsored talks in the Austrian spa town of Baden – with the European Union, United States and Russia playing referee – failed to break the deadlock. Now Kosovo's 90 per cent Albanian majority is preparing to declare independence within months. Serbia has said this will lead to chaos.

All involved in the Austrian talks hastened to say a descent into violence was out of the question. "Both sides have made it clear to us they are committed to avoiding violence," a leading EU negotiator, Wolfgang Ischinger, said. "This commitment to peace must continue."

Nonetheless, there are fears that the Balkans is in imminent peril. "The peace of the region is very much at stake," the chief American mediator, Frank Wisner, said. "It is a volatile region. We are going into a very difficult time."

The failure of the talks was no surprise. Serbia has never budged from its fixed stand that Kosovo is, always has been and always will be a province of Serbia, whatever the wishes of the Albanians. But during recent elections in Kosovo, the only issue on which all ethnic Albanian candidates were united was the need for independence, rather than the partial autonomy offered by Serbia.

The troika of mediators will pay final visits to Belgrade and Pristina before submitting their report to the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, on 10 December. Serbia continues to maintain that talks must continue beyond that, but Kosovo's leaders insisted they were already at the end of the road. "We consider this process thoroughly exhausted," said Kosovo's President Fatmir Sejdiu, making it clear he would not agree to further talks.

If the problem were to be passed back to the UN Security Council, a decision in favour of Kosovan independence would almost certainly be blocked by Russia.

Despite the promise to avoid violence, Serbian leaders did not hide their anger. "We are going to cancel all these decisions taken by the Kosovo authorities leading to independence, and we will use all legal means to do so," warned the Serbian President, Boris Tadic. "This is a very serious situation."



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Possible steps would include de facto border closures, forcing Kosovars to make long detours, and a ban on energy exports to Kosovo – which takes about 40 per cent of its energy from Serbia. But, as a Serbian negotiator conceded, there would be no way to prevent such measures also hurting Kosovo's Serbs.

Although Kosovo remained tense but largely at peace during the wars that consumed Croatia and Bosnia, war finally engulfed it in 1998 when vicious fighting broke out between the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Serb forces of Slobodan Milosevic. Around 10,000 Albanians and 3,000 Serbs were killed. Nato forces intervened in 1999, starting a 78-day war and UN forces have been stationed there ever since. Russia has raised the possibility that Kosovo's independence could spark a wave of copycat declarations by tiny, would-be nations inside and outside the Balkans. Serbs, who have their own "Republika Srpska" inside Bosnia, might secede, while Albanians in Macedonia could be tempted to do the same. The Balkans, in other words, could be in for another round of Balkanisation.