



# KOSOVO

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## The Waiting Game

The Economist

[http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9867262](http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9867262)

THIS week Serbs and Kosovo Albanians (Kosovars) are meeting in New York to discuss the future of Kosovo—or so diplomats would have everyone believe. In fact, the two sides are simply restating their well-known positions. The Kosovars want independence; the Serbs say they cannot have it. Since the parties cannot agree, diplomats on all sides have merely been pretending that genuine negotiations are taking place.

There is a debate about Kosovo. But it is not between Serbs and Kosovars, nor even between Russians and Americans. Rather it is within the European Union. What EU countries decide will matter not just for the 2m inhabitants of Kosovo, 90% of whom are ethnic Albanians. It will also affect the credibility of the EU's nascent foreign policy.

On the map, Kosovo is Serbia's southern province. But since the end of the war in 1999 it has been under United Nations jurisdiction. Serbs in Kosovo live in heavily protected enclaves or in a compact patch abutting Serbia proper. The Kosovars have long demanded independence. Serbia has promised to grant Kosovo almost unlimited autonomy short of independence, but given its history the Kosovars are not interested.

In March, Martti Ahtisaari, a former Finnish president, gave the UN a plan for “supervised independence”, after 14 rounds of mostly fruitless negotiations. But Russia said it would veto a Security Council resolution backing this. In desperation, fresh talks were initiated. On December 10th the Russian, American and EU ambassadors overseeing these fictitious negotiations will report back. Western diplomats (and Kosovars) say that will be the end of the game; the Russians (and Serbs) say it will not be.

Given the Russian stance, and statements by the Americans that they will recognise Kosovo if it declares independence after December 10th, neither party has an incentive to take the process seriously. It is what the Europeans do that matters. America does not want to be the only big power to recognise an independent Kosovo. Britain and France would like to, and they do not like what they see as Russian interference in an internal European matter. But they also want to maintain EU unity.

So the spotlight will shift to Berlin. If Germany recognises Kosovo's independence, Italy and most (but not all) other EU countries will probably follow. Serbia would then be at a fork in the road. The prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica, is mounting shrill attacks on NATO and the West. Ministers from his party have also been saying that, if European countries recognise an independent Kosovo, Serbia will no longer seek to join the EU.

If Serbia ends its EU bid, it will head into isolation, and may drag all of the western Balkans with it. Yet Kosovo will not wait placidly forever: this week a bomb in Pristina killed two people. Faced with unpalatable choices, it will be no surprise if the diplomats, or their political masters, find another reason for delay when December 10th comes.