

Ambassador Frank G. Wisner
Special Representative to the Kosovo Status Talks

Interview with VOA Serbian Service
U.S. State Department
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Question: Ambassador Wisner, thank you for taking the time to do this interview. It seems that Kosovo has become a major point of dispute between the United States and Russia and today there was a meeting between Secretary Rice and President Putin. Based on reports, not much progress has been made. So what is next for Washington?

Ambassador Wisner: I think you're absolutely right. The President of Russia and Secretary Rice, the Foreign Minister as well, had very detailed, very frank discussions about Kosovo. The Russian side was clear about their concerns and we've stated our own views which are that this matter needs to be settled. Kosovo needs to achieve final status. The matter is before the United Nations. We and Russia have a responsibility to find common ground. We are in discussions in New York. Those will continue and we like to think we're going to get there, that is find common ground with our Russian friends.

Question: Last week there were the first serious indications from Moscow that they might be ready to use their right of veto. I think it came from Ambassador Churkin. Are there concerns in Washington that a Russian veto may be made in the Security Council?

Ambassador Wisner: I wouldn't say the Russian side. I just don't agree the Russian side has made its mind up, has decided to veto or not veto. There is serious work to be done on the Security Council resolution. Until that work is completed there isn't even a basis on which a decision could be made. So I'm optimistic. We're going to be hard at work in New York to find that common ground and I think we ought to try to move ahead with it.

Question: There are some sources in the United Nations and some sources in Belgrade that say there is not enough support in the Security Council for American and European version of the resolution. That there is not enough number of votes. How do things stand? And do you expect this resolution may be passed by the end of May as was projected?

Ambassador Wisner: Well, on the two questions you raised, yes, I believe there is substantial support in the Security Council for the passage of a resolution that would give Kosovo a final status understanding. Second, the objective of the United States and the co-sponsors of the resolution, the European nations, is to get this job done as fast as possible. Great by the end of May. That ought to be the objective. We'd all like to pursue that. We're not setting any artificial deadlines, but we're not going to lose any time either. This is a matter whose time has come.

Question: So it may take longer than May.

Ambassador Wisner: I'm not going to suggest that. Those are your words. I'd rather say it doesn't have to take longer, it ought to be done quickly. Time is important. Time is no one's friend. That is, the situation in the region calls for a rapid solution, a solution that would be good for Kosovo and I believe as well good for Serbia.

Question: Washington has strongly stated that it supports the Ahtisaari Plan as it is, in its present form. Today we've heard the proposal of the International Crisis Group which also supports Kosovo independence to maybe allow for some modifications of the plan so that Russia can have some dignified way out. Are those modifications realistic?

Ambassador Wisner: I'm not sure what modifications you're talking about. We certainly, as the United States government, are proposing no modifications to the Ahtisaari Plan. We think it's comprehensive, solid, well reasoned, and a good, fine way to proceed.

Question: The ICG suggested that maybe a two year moratorium should be introduced before Kosovo can apply for membership in the United Nations. Would that be considered?

Ambassador Wisner: That's not part of the Ahtisaari Plan and it's an entirely separate process. Membership in the United Nations is a step that has to go through the Security Council, then has to be voted on by the General Assembly. It has nothing to do with the issue under consideration at the moment.

Question: Close to the end of the interview, let's move to the Serbian political scene. We have this fragile government. It's pro-reform and democratic, which is a good sign, but some projected it's not going to be very stable and very long term, especially if the Kosovo solution is imposed, that nationalism will be on the rise and radicals will be also. Do you fear this might be the scenario?

Ambassador Wisner: I certainly hope not. I'd like to think that resolving the issue of Kosovo which has remained ambiguous, clouding the horizon of Serbia. When that issue is settled Serbs will be able to look to their future -- a future in Europe, a future in the transatlantic community, a future membership in NATO. But until there is resolution, clarity, refugees won't know if they can go home, the outstanding issues of relations between Kosovo and Serbia will not be settled. We'll be in limbo. So for Serbia's good I believe deeply a resolution of Kosovo will play to the long term benefit of Serbia.

Question: Just a final question. Prime Minister Koštunica, new and old Prime Minister today set out priorities of a new government. Number one is Kosovo and he reaffirmed Serbian policy, that Kosovo had to stay in Serbia; that any country that unilaterally recognizes Kosovo's independence will be regarded as interfering in Serbia's sovereign affairs.

So how do you see this attitude?

Ambassador Wisner: I regret such a sort of predictive statement, but it doesn't surprise me. It's a longstanding view of the Prime Minister. Serbia has the right to that view. We have the right to our view as well, and that view is that the time has come to resolve the Kosovo matter. It's before the United Nations. That's what 1244 provided for, the United Nations Security Council to make the decision. That's where it ought to be made, should be made, and we hope will be made very very quickly.

Question: Thank you very much, Ambassador.

Ambassador Wisner: Thanks.

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