

Assistant Secretary Philip H. Gordon interview with Alsat M TV
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Skopje

Alsat M TV: Mr. Gordon, you just finished your visit to the Balkan region. You visited Pristina, Belgrade and Skopje. What are your impressions after this tour of three Balkan capitals?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: Lots of different impressions. Let me just first say I am delighted to be here in Skopje. I decided to take a week and travel to Belgrade, Pristina and Skopje because a lot of important things are going on in this region and I want to have a firsthand look. It has been a year since I've been to Kosovo and Serbia. I was there last May with Vice President Biden and we've got a lot of important business with those two countries going on. The International Court of Justice opinion will be out sooner or later and we really want to use that as an opportunity to turn the corner in our bilateral relationship with Serbia and in the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia. I also wanted to go to Kosovo to underscore the United States strong support for that country's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Where Macedonia is concerned, I wanted to come since I have been following issues very closely from abroad. I am briefed regularly by Ambassador Reeker and others but I wanted to come and have a firsthand sense of what was going on in the country.

Alsat M TV: Before we come back to Macedonia let me just get back to Pristina and Belgrade because many of the things that you discussed in Pristina and Belgrade do refer to our political and regional security situation. How far along are the talks between Belgrade and Pristina and can we expect something to happen this summer in their direct relations over the issues that are still open?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: I guess I would say they are not far enough along. There are some important unresolved issues not least the question simply of recognizing Kosovo as we do but also practical matters having to do with energy, electricity, courts, missing persons and those are the things we would like to see the countries constructively discuss.

Alsat M TV: So, it is not about the division of Kosovo as some rumors are saying that we should expect something on that agenda by the end of this year.

Assistant Secretary Gordon: I can be very clear on that that. We don't support the division of Kosovo. You are right that some have here and there have alluded to these ideas that maybe the solution to this problem is some form of partition. But I was able to tell the leaders in Belgrade and Pristina that the United States clearly opposes that. It's not only not the right solution for Northern Kosovo but as a precedent for the region we think it would be a very destabilizing thing if you accepted the notion that borders should be defined by ethnicity where would that lead you in Serbia, in Macedonia, in Bosnia? We think that answer is not right. So we've been categorical that we do not see partition as the way forward in Kosovo.

Alsa t M TV: Talking about the borders, we do face some insecurity on the Macedonian-Kosovo border in the last couple of weeks. Is it possible that those actions of some military groups, whatever they are called and call themselves, are connected to these Kosovo-Serbia relations?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: First of all, let me say we are very concerned about what we've seen in the past few days about armed groups wherever they are coming from on whichever side of the border reminding us of the dangers of these ethnic tensions getting out of hand. We are pleased with the way in which the Governments of Macedonia and Kosovo responded to this, quickly responding and responsible parties on both sides condemning the violence and the trading in arms that seems to be going on. It does seem to be contained and limited for now but it is precisely for that reason that we need to see the political leaders and populations in the counties promote ethnic harmony because we know from this region how that can get out of hand.

Alsa t M TV: It is said in Macedonia that we do not have a security crisis. What we have is a political crisis. Have you talked about these things with the Macedonian political leaders while you were in Skopje?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: Yes, one of the big issues on my agenda was in fact the issue of inter-ethnic relations and political harmony. It was a timely visit in that sense, because we've seen again these incidents in the past few days, these disturbing incidents, and wants to make sure that political leaders are taking this seriously enough. Again I welcome the statements made by leaders on all sides. I met with Ali Ahmeti this afternoon. He clearly denounced the violence and called for responsible behavior. This is all the things we need to see in the leaders. No one can think that there is any space in this country or this region for that sort of taking up arms and provocation.

Alsa t M TV: This takes us to the position of Mr. Ali Ahmeti in DUI and the Government coalition. That position is very much under the pressure of how fast we deal with the integration processes with NATO and EU. We've heard that the American administration has come up with the so-called preferable date that these negotiations over the name issue between Macedonia and Greece should be finished by the end of the summer. Can you clarify this for us?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: Sure. It's not for us to come forward with specific plans and specific dates and to tell the parties what they need to do. For us the date is clear, it is as soon as possible. The date is yesterday. We think this issue has gone on far too long; the parties need to come to an agreement, it is in their mutual interest to do so. For Macedonia it would open the path to NATO membership, it would put them on course for EU membership, both of which would help stabilize the country and would be in the interest of all.

Alsa t M TV: Do you see enough activities in that direction, because these kinds of statements we've heard many times, but do you see that both governments are actually doing any substantial moves?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: Yes, actually I do. I think the two governments are serious about moving on this front, more serious than governments have been in the past. It's not easy; if it were easy it would have been resolved a long time ago. But you have a newly elected government in Greece that I think wants to put this dispute behind us and move forward in regional cooperation. I think the Macedonian leadership understands how important it is to resolve this and we are doing whatever we can to push that process along. So, I don't want to overstate it, it's a difficult issue on both sides, but I do think there is a new dynamism and we need to take advantage of it.

Alsa t M TV: So, there are no precise dates for closing the issue.

Assistant Secretary Gordon: Well, the precise date as I said, seriously, is as soon as possible. With each passing week and month we are losing valuable time, we are losing the fact that you do have a newly elected Greek government with a strong mandate to act. If you wait too long, the conditions may not be in place any more. There is the June Council meeting of the European Union that will decide on issues like candidacy for Macedonia. If the dispute is resolved before then Macedonia could move forward in a way that it otherwise couldn't. If the dispute can be resolved soon, Macedonia will be on target to join other NATO leaders at the Lisbon Summit in November. Imagine, that would be a real triumph for this country and if we miss this window maybe it will be another 19-20 years.

Alsa t M TV: What will happen in 19-20 years if we miss this window? Do you have some clear perception, clear picture of where Macedonia will go after that?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: I think the answer to that is unpredictable, which is precisely why we don't want to test the proposition. No one can predict for certain. Maybe things will remain relatively stable. But we know that bringing this country as a united Macedonia into NATO would reassure all of its citizens and increase the prospect that it becomes more and more stable over time.

Alsa t M TV: There are perceptions in Macedonia sometimes supported by certain government circles that the way NATO and EU decide on their own matters is going to change, that it's going to be consensus minus one, or majority votes, etc. Can you clarify if these things can be changed in NATO and EU?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: I know of no plans in either organization to change the mechanism for enlargement. Even as the EU has over time moved towards majority voting in certain areas, nobody has ever seriously considered being able to decide enlargement by anything other than a consensus. NATO has always been the same way and I think that's going to be true for some time. And that's why, whether you like it or not, the reality is that only when all members of the Alliance or the Union agree to bring in someone new, will that happen.

Alsa t M TV: Due to this conflict in schedules in the flight today, you did not meet with the Macedonian Prime Minister and you are going to meet him in Zagreb. What are the points that you are going to discuss with Mr. Gruevski?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: Well the same points that I've been discussing with other leaders throughout the day. I am delighted that we managed to work this out logistically, I was intending to see him here, which is one of the reasons I came to Skopje. He was trapped in Morocco by an ash cloud. Fortunately I was supposed to go via Zagreb anyway; he is going to be in Zagreb, so... I do not want to speak...we'll see if it happens with the flights..if logistics are working in our favor and I look forward to seeing him and to discussing with him the same issues I discussed with others, which is the expressing the strong support of the United States for Macedonia and its path to Euro-Atlantic institutions, the issue of inter-ethnic relations within Macedonia, to get a better sense of that issue and to strongly encourage harmony, and of course, the name issue and to encourage a solution on that.

Alsa t M TV: In the end, there is an impression in the Balkans and in Skopje certainly that the Balkan region and certainly Macedonia is not among any of the priorities of this American administration. Is that true?

Assistant Secretary Gordon: No, I don't think it's true at all. You know, the Obama administration is full of senior officials who have a lot of experience and interest in the Balkans. We spent a lot of time on this during the Clinton administration and that is the last time some of them served in Government and I can tell you it is important to President Obama and Secretary Clinton. You know Deputy Secretary Steinberg has been to this region more than any other region in the world in the first 18 months of the Obama administration. We are strongly committed to it and we consider it unfinished business to get there countries of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions.