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## MITCHELL TOURS BALKANS ON MISSION TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS

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The new US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Wess Mitchell, started a tour of Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Greece on Monday, aiming to address various potential frozen conflicts in the Balkans region.

These two key problems in the region are between Serbs and Albanians [over Kosovo] and the Greece-Macedonia [name] dispute, a foreign policy expert in Belgrade, Bosko Jaksic, told BIRN.

He said Mitchells visit formed part of an American policy to resolve all potential frozen conflicts in the Western Balkans, in order to more efficiently block the growing influence of Russia.

He predicted that while Mitchell would put pressure on Kosovo to finally establish the long-awaited Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, Serbia will be urged to stop blocking Kosovos membership of the UN.

For a long time, Ive considered this to be the only realistic and sustainable solution, Jaksic said, adding that Serbia would then open wide the door to [membership of] the EU but without having to recognize Kosovos independence.

A former Macedonian Ambassador to Vienna, Gjorgji Filipov, said Mitchells visit to Macedonia and Greece would convey the messages that the two countries must solve the dispute over Macedonia's name □ and that Macedonia has friends that support its aspirations to join NATO and the EU.

I see this as a joint and coordinated action of Europe and of the United States for a final resolution of various disputes in the Balkans, Filipov told Macedonian TV.

One of them is the 'name' dispute, which is hampering future European developments. He comes to encourage all sides ... to speed up efforts for solutions because the global political and economic development demands peace in this region, he said.

Mitchell began his visit to Kosovo by denying speculation that he was about to present a new plan to solve the conflict between Serbia and its former province, which declared independence in 2008.

I did see that speculation on the way over here and I thought was very creative journalism, Mitchell said in Pristina during a joint press conference with Kosovo President Hashim Thaci.

He said that he came to engage with both Kosovo and Serbia on the question of their joint future, talk about dialogue, [and] about the Western path for both countries and for the Western Balkans.

Mitchell said he and Thaci had talked about normalisation of relations with Belgrade, and about the importance of Kosovo staying very closely engaged with Serbia in the dialogue, as well as about Kosovo's border issues with Montenegro.

We talked about security transformation and securing support from all parties and communities for constitutional amendment and I underscored to the President and will say it again here that no one has a veto on Kosovos security, Mitchell said.

On Tuesday, after leaving Kosovo and Macedonia, Mitchell will go to Serbia, where he will meet President Aleksandar Vucic, Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic and representatives of the opposition.

He will then visit Greece. Mitchell will also visit Cyprus on Saturday.

Mitchell was named Assistant Secretary of State in September 2017 after being nominated by the US President Donald Trump.

During the US presidential election campaign in 2012, he was an advisor on national security for the Republican Party candidate Mitt Romney.

He was the founder and president of the Centre for European Policy Analysis, a non-profit research institute whose stated mission is to promote an economically vibrant, strategically secure and politically free Central and Eastern Europe with close and enduring ties to the United States.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/mitchell-s-visit-pushes-for-solution-of-balkans-conflicts-03-12-2018>

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