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June 9, 2008

Serbia expects key powers in north Kosovo

Reuters

<http://www.reuters.com/article/europeCrisis/idUSL06279875>

Serbia expects to get extensive rights to administer Kosovo's Serb areas under a plan being considered at the United Nations, a government minister said.

Serbia's Kosovo Minister Slobodan Samardzic told Reuters that the U.N. had accepted key elements of a Serb proposal presented after Kosovo's Albanian majority declared independence in February, a move rejected by the Serb minority.

He said Belgrade was proposing a partnership with the U.N.'s Kosovo mission, UNMIK, that would effectively give it rights to run vital services in areas populated by the 120,000 remaining Serbs -- something the Albanians fear borders on partition.

"We have identified six areas that are key to Serbs' life and their survival in Kosovo," Samardzic said in an interview.

He listed police, customs, justice, control of the Serbia-Kosovo border, transport and telecoms, and protection of Serbia's cultural heritage.

"These parallel institutions, this functional division, only represents the facts on the ground," Samardzic said.

"Our proposal has been accepted, but it has become part of a package by the U.N. Secretary-General on the reconfiguration of UNMIK," Samardzic said. "We expect his letter any day now."

The United Nations and European Union are exploring ways to win Serbian, and thus Russian, acquiescence to a 2,200-strong EU police and justice mission, EULEX, that was due to take over from UNMIK.

Serbia and the Kosovo Serb minority reject EULEX as illegal. Samardzic made clear that Belgrade would not drop its opposition to the mission, which is still waiting to deploy under a Western-backed blueprint for Kosovo's independence.

It had been due to be fully operational on June 15, when Kosovo's first state constitution enters into force and Kosovo Albanians expect to receive a raft of new powers from UNMIK.

UNMIK says it is awaiting instructions from U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on its "reconfiguration".



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"FROZEN CONFLICT"

Kosovo seceded from Serbia in February with Western backing after nine years as a ward of the United Nations.

It runs much of its own affairs, but the U.N. mission has the last word on key issues. Serb ally Russia is blocking the power handover due on June 15, leaving Kosovo staring at a jumble of international oversight that could persist for years.

Samardzic said Serbia was categorically opposed to EULEX as a mission designed to consolidate independence, and to any 'reconfiguration' of UNMIK without a new or amended U.N. Security Council resolution.

Kosovo's two communities have lived apart since 1999, when NATO drove out Serb troops accused of killing thousands of Albanian civilians in a counter-insurgency war and the U.N. took over.

"If the EU were to form a new mission that would be a pillar of UNMIK in Kosovo, as it has had so far in the economic sphere, we wouldn't have anything against it," Samardzic said. He said that Ban Ki-moon was being rushed by the West to settle the situation before the proclamation of Kosovo's constitution next week. But that act meant nothing to Serbia, which considered it as illegal as Kosovo's independence declaration.

Belgrade was focusing on local authorities elected by Kosovo Serbs and loyal to Serbia, which would finance them as it had done with the Serbs' health and education system since 1999.

"What we have here is more or less a frozen conflict that will last long and be solved only with negotiation," he said.

"Serbs will continue to lead their own lives in Kosovo and Serbia will carry out its own policy in Kosovo, where it can."