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INTERVIEW

Q: Hello, I am Melissa Myrtaj. Today is February 29th and I am here with Tom Yazdgerdi. He was the Deputy Chief of Mission and Political Economic Chief from 2006-2009 in Kosovo. Thank you for coming, Tom. So, I would like to have this meeting to kind of understand the initial goals of Kosovo, the concerns of stabilizing, and ultimately what made this a case of recognition in the international scope. So to start off, prior to your mission, what did Kosovo diplomacy look like in the U.S.? Did Kosovo maintain any informal offices in Washington D.C. or other capitals?

YAZDGERDI: That's a good question. Well just to clarify, I was Political-Economic Chief from 2006 to 2008 and then I was sort of battlefield commissioned to DCM (Deputy Chief Mission) when the DCM that was supposed to arrive unfortunately for

health reasons could not. So I just want to clarify that. Whether Kosovo had official diplomatic offices in the United States, to be honest with you, I wasn't, I'm not aware of, but there were certainly plenty of opportunities for the Kosovo leadership, the political leadership, to make its views known to the United States and to, you know, major European allies, let's say. So, I'm not sure if they actually had a formal office in Washington and other sort of important capitals.

Q: And how were you assigned Kosovo?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah, that's a good question. So I knew, I was serving in Athens, Greece before Kosovo from 2003-2006 and when I saw that that Political-Economic Chief job was on the bid list, I thought, my god, that's exciting because I had, from the beginning, I had a sense that the only viable option for Kosovo, to be honest with you, for the region for stability and prosperity was for Kosovo to have some form of independence. And so I wanted to be part of that. I knew that was happening. It would happen in the 2006 to 2008 timeframe, I thought. So what I did is, at the time, the European Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Balkans, for South Central Europe. I know that's sort of a pejorative term, people in the region don't like the term Balkans. But, her name was Rosemary DiCarlo and she was the DAS, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for that region. So, she also came to Athens on a visit because, you know, she was interested in the views of Greece and other countries on Kosovo status. And so I made sure I was her control officer. And when I was riding around with her and taking notes at various meetings, I had a chance to talk with her and I told her about my interest in being the political economic chief at the then U.S. office, Pristina. And she said, really? And I said, yes, I really, I have an abiding interest in it. I did an excursion tour with the National Democratic Institute from 1999-2000 as their senior Balkans program officer. And just as the war ended in Kosovo in the summer of 1999, USAID basically gave NDI some money to start democratization programs in Pristina and elsewhere in Kosovo. And so I did that. And so I had a background already. I saw Pristina, what it looked like right after the war, which was a very different situation than when I served there. So I wanted her to kind of go to bat for me. I tried to impress upon her my knowledge of the region and having been in Kosovo with NDI. And I'm happy to say, I don't know if that was the only way I got chosen, but I think that probably helped me. And so I ended up getting the job.

Q: So that's kind of like your precursor knowledge. And once you're assigned the job, how did you further prepare for entering the region?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah. So it's funny. In graduate school, I was actually more interested in Central Europe. My mom is of Czech origin and I studied Czechoslovak politics when it was still communist. But as I, you know, in the Foreign Service when I joined, you tend to also branch out into other areas and issues that might be of interest to you. And that happened to me. And I realized that I was particularly interested in the Balkans because those were still the real large issues that were not resolved, let's say, in Europe. Bosnia, of course, Kosovo. I mean, these were issues that interested me a great deal. So I had an interest in that. I did the NDI program manager job. And so I really started, and after I did this job with NDI, this excursion tour, I also served in Albania. For two years, from 2000

to 2002. And that's how I got to know Tom Selinger, sitting right here. And, I sort of fell in love with that country. Albania was one of the probably most pro-American countries in the world. It was really a fascinating place. It was just emerging when I served there from, you know, decades of communist, very, very, strict and cruel, I would say, communist cruel. And it looked to the United States as its main partner, international partner. And we took that mantle up. We did.

And so I had that background as well. Of course, Albania was right next door. And so that also, I think, had, you know, had something in my corner going for me. That I not only had this NDI experience, but I also had served in Albania. And when I was in Athens, I was the Deputy Political Counselor there. As part of my portfolio, I dealt with the Western Balkans. So Greece organized in Thessaloniki a large grouping of the Southeast Europe Cooperation Process, as it was called. And I remember meeting leaders from all over the region there. I helped kind of the U.S. participation.Rosemary DiCarlo, I think, was one of the leaders of that, of our delegation. So I think I had a pretty good understanding. I think I had a pretty good grounding in the region, and the history, and so on. And it was sort of my, if you will, sort of my major in the Foreign Service, the Balkans area. I'm glad, I'm really glad that the committee, or whoever decided that, to get this Political-Economic job, chose me.

Q: Thank you. And so when you were finally signed to go to Kosovo, what were the initial goals that you kind of meant to keep in check and promote?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah. Well, first of all, our overriding goal was to promote stability, prosperity in the region for everyone. The region was just emerging from the horrible war in Bosnia, and from the Kosovo War. And so, you know, it was interesting, the difference when I saw Pristina in the fall of 1999, and when I saw it again in 2006, when I arrived to work in the embassy. In 1999, I remember the only way to get to Pristina was to actually fly into Skopje, and take a U.N. shuttle bus, from Skopje to Pristina. It was too dangerous to fly into Pristina. They didn't have the infrastructure yet. And I remember, in 1999, I was accompanied by a bunch of NGO folks, who were all excited about helping. Yeah. Helping to rebuild Kosovo. And they're all, you know, we're all talking to each other about what we're doing. And then, we crossed the border, and we just see destruction as far as the eye could see. Just burned down houses, and people stopped talking, and just looked out the window. When I came in 2006, a lot, I would say the vast majority had been rebuilt. So it just goes to show you what seven years had done in the development of Kosovo.

Just getting back to your question, our overarching issue was one of peace and stability in the Balkans. And when I arrived, status talks, Kosovo status talks were in full swing. Between Serbia and Kosovo, monitored by the international community. The International Contact Group, which it was called, included Russia. And so, you know, we didn't know exactly what these talks might bring. Although my sense was that Serbia obviously and the other Balkan countries had a lot of interest in Kosovo. My sense was that Serbia and Kosovo would probably not be able to come to agreement, because the positions were too far apart. Obviously, Serbia wanted some degree of autonomy for

Kosovo. You know, Kosovo, the Kosovar side could not imagine ever going back under Serbian rule, given what Milosevic had done in Kosovo, going back under even the titular authority of Serbia. So you had very different positions. I think the United States supported letting these talks sort of run their course so when I arrived in 2006 they were still going on. So, we supported those talks. We actually appointed a very senior retired diplomat named Frank Wisner who was our special envoy for the Kosovo status talks. We dealt with Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish president who was the international leader in this effort. So you had the Serbian side, the Kosovo side and then Martti Ahtisaari leading the international side of which the United States was part.

So it was a very interesting time. We just wanted to make certain that these talks were conducted in a peaceful environment to make certain that there were no outbreaks of violence which could have happened at any time and sometimes, thank God, not on a large scale but sometimes did. So those were our sort of overarching goals and that's when I arrived in the summer of 2006.

Q: Wow, that's just the beginning. So you spoke a little bit about some of the major officials that were leading the talks and stabilizing the region. If you could name some others or specifically other officials you have spoken with and how frequently you met with them, people who just kind of kept your goals aligned.

YAZDGERDI: Yeah of course. On the US side I mentioned Rosemary DiCarlo the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the region. Dan Fried was the Assistant Secretary for Europe who was integrally involved in this. I mean this was probably the focal point of sort of the European Bureau's position on what to do, to make certain that Kosovo, the status talks would bring peace and stability to not only Kosovo, but the region. So it was incredible. I would say it was probably priority number one, to be honest with you, in the European Bureau at the time. So Dan Fried was involved. I mentioned Frank Wisner. After Rosemary departed, I think she did in 2007, Stuart Jones, another seasoned diplomat, was the DAS for the region. You know, we dealt with lots and lots of foreigners, high-level foreigners. Martti Ahtisaari as I mentioned. We dealt with our friends and allies who had missions to Kosovo in Pristina, or, you know, in their capitals if they did not. We even met with the Russians at the time. We were talking with the Russians, and they were part of the contact group. We didn't obviously always see eye to eye, but, you know, Russia did agree to UN Resolution 1244 that allowed the United Nations to enter Kosovo. It was really unprecedented, because never had the United Nations actually administered a part of a former country. They had never done that before. So they were kind of making this up in a sense as they went along, because they hadn't done it. So we dealt with the NATO force that was present there, called KFOR, Kosovo Force.

We dealt with the OSCE as well. I would say, you know, the United States certainly was sort of the first among equals in terms of its role and influence. First of all, it was the high regard that Kosovars held for the United States. We were the make-weight of diplomacy in the world. When the chips were down, people would turn to the United States, and we had this opportunity, I think I would call it, in Kosovo, to try to convince sometimes even

our own closest allies of why this would make the most sense. So we dealt with the, I would call it the alphabet soup of international organizations that were there. So, it felt like the United States was sort of the nexus of international decision-making for Kosovo.

SELINGER: European Union as well?

YAZDGERDI: European Union as well. They did. In fact, we can get into this later, but once Kosovo declared its independence, the EU Special Representative became the International Civilian Representative, the International Civilian Office, the ICO as it was called. And, of course, we cooperated with that organization as well.

Q: I have a question actually about how Russia allowed the UN to enter Kosovo. What was that, like? If you can anticipate sort of what was Russian thinking to kind of put the switch a little bit and allow them to come in because they've had a very, they haven't been as, they don't recognize Kosovo right now, so.

YAZDGERDI: You know, it was a very different environment back then. Relations between the United States and Russia were much better than they are now. I think even the Russians at that time realized that with Milosevic's troops gone, there needed to be some sort of status neutral, and we accepted that term at the time, an organization to come into Kosovo and administer the day-to-day needs of the Kosovars. People still needed to have access to food, water, shelter, and the rest of it. And really the only organization that was set up to do this that would be acceptable to the Russians, and the Chinese, by the way, was the UN. And so, I think if we had such a situation now, I don't think we'd be able to get that agreement. But I think at the time, given what was at stake, that this province, this former province of Serbia, which in no way could return to the status it had before, needed help. And really, I think the Russians understood that, and that's why I think, you know, I'm not an authority on the reasons behind their decision, but I think that was probably the main decision, that if you didn't do that, there probably would be a humanitarian tragedy or disaster on your hands.

Q: Okay. Yeah, a little different now than it was back then, I guess. And so, aside from your foreign contacts and the people on the ground in Kosovo with you, who were the key actors and stakeholders in D.C. that were advising you?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah, I mentioned some of the team that we had. Obviously, Tina Kaidanow was our ambassador in Kosovo. We had a really strong team in D.C., led by Dan Fried, going all the way down to the office director and desk officer. You know, a guy named Josh Black was our day-to-day Kosovo status talks person. He worked closely with Rosemary DiCarlo. We dealt with people like the desk officer, Seiji Shiratori. Paul Pfeufer, who has been involved and is still there in the South Central Europe office at State. He's been there since God knows how long. We had a really good, seasoned team. We'd been focused on this issue at every level, I have to say, in our government.

And we had interest from Congress, including congressional delegations, or CODELs. So, we had lots and lots of official visitors come to Kosovo to see for themselves what

was going on. Because, of course, we wanted to have and thought we would, and thank God we did, have the backing of the U.S. Congress. So, I think we were all, in a sense, pulling together in the same direction. It's not always the case. It's very difficult to do that now. We're seeing how that is playing out with aid to Ukraine. But back then, there really wasn't any sort of counterargument to be made to letting Kosovo continue with the status talks. And if those didn't work, then, you know, as I said, my gut feeling was the only thing that could keep this place stable and prosperous and the region was some sort of form of independence, which turned out to be the case.

So, it was really quite stressful because we had lots and lots of visits of high-level officials coming all the time. I think Frank Wisner, who was a very senior retired diplomat, former ambassador to India, and his father was one of the founders of the CIA. Very, very senior guy. He came about five or six times a year. So, he was coming and meeting with folks and kind of giving them the view from Washington.

Q: You speak a lot about this being like an opportunity to go to the area and how very frequently people look at the U.S. and were very happy to kind of step forward time and time again, and especially in this case. But were there ever like any points of contention between you and the State Department or other embassies? Like what it's supposed to look like?

YAZDGERDI: You know, it's easy in hindsight to say this was always the way it was going to turn out But at the time we didn't know that. We also did not want the United States to be the only country that was arguing in favor of some form of independence for Kosovo. We wanted to have our friends and allies with us. So, occasionally we did have disagreements. I'll give you an example that happened within the U.S. government. It's kind of a small thing, but one thing that I was involved in. So, a high-level official, who shall remain nameless, was visiting. And this person argued, there was going to be national elections in Kosovo in 2007, I think in November. And this official argued forcefully for postponing those elections. And I remember I was in the room listening to that. And I put my hand up and here I am, a fourth tour officer and this person was very senior. And I said, if we do that, if the United States chooses to argue in favor of delaying the elections, we will actually open the door to greater instability in Kosovo. You never want to delay elections unless there's a real good reason to do so.

Just by saying the status talks might be over and it might be a volatile time is really not good enough. Especially when the opposition party in Kosovo, at that time led by Hashim Thaciachi, was doing quite well in the polls. So if we all of a sudden were to say, well, the United States is going to, you know, delay the election indefinitely, I think that would have led to greater instability. You always want to hold elections. I'm glad to say, even though I was kind of dressed down in that meeting by this high-level official, I'm glad to say that the view to keep the election schedule won the day. And the ambassador, of course, had a hand in that as well. She agreed also that that did not make sense. The elections happened and there were international monitors. There were some irregularities but nothing that would change the outcome of the election. The opposition folks came into power and, you know, soon after that they declared independence. So, we were

confident that they could hold elections and still deal with the outcome of the status talks and the declaration of independence without any serious instability. And that turned out to be the case.

Q: So, yeah, you talk about the need for the elections to kind of keep the momentum going, to make sure it still has this legitimized platform, kind of pursuing these democratic ideals. And with that, that's obviously kind of on the U.S. agenda and definitely international organizations' agenda of democracy. What other kinds of principles guided your decision-making, like elections?

YAZDGERDI: So, what principles guided our decision-making?

Q: Sorry, elections and just like anything else that was moving forward with Kosovo, like this is what we should do because one, it's democratic or one, it gives the momentum. Or like clearly the most basis is not instability. But what other principles?

YAZDGERDI: You know, the principle of not having things blow up, I think I would say, that's an important principle. But I think, all kidding aside, I think we had to make certain that Kosovo could demonstrate that it's not every day that a new country comes into being in the world. It doesn't only take a yearning for that. Some regions in the world might desire independence, but very few actually become countries. So it doesn't happen very often. So we wanted to make certain that no one, including those who even nowadays still don't support Kosovo independence, the Kosovars could demonstrate that they had the wherewithal to not only govern themselves, but also protect minorities, particularly the Serb minority in Kosovo. We were laser focused on that because if they allowed, and there was still a lot of, as you can imagine, a lot of hatred, a lot of ethnic, hatred, we drilled into the Kosovar leaders as best we could that in order for you to demonstrate that you are ready for statehood, you have to protect everyone. Everyone has to feel safe and secure, not just the majority. The Kosovar Albanian population, but also the ethnic Serb population.

We had really good contacts, and I think this is part of some of the other questions you asked. We had really good contacts with ethnic Serb leaders. Not all of them, of course, agreed with Kosovo independence, but they understood the United States at least was playing the role of an honest broker and was interested in their security. That was key. And so I remember we had great contacts, for example, with Father Sava at the Decani Monastery. We would go out there all the time and bring high-level political leaders, congressional leaders out to visit him.

And we wanted to make certain that, because sometimes there were pressures on the monastery to take bits of land away, we made certain that that wasn't the case. And again, we, you know, it was a very heady time, but there was also, we wanted to make certain that Kosovar leaders realized, recognized they had the responsibility to demonstrate that. They had the responsibility to demonstrate to the outside world, to the international community, they would protect their ethnic minorities. By the way, not only ethnic Serbs, but Turks, there were ethnic Turks there, there were Gorani, and, you know, the Romani

population as well. They had to respect minority rights. They had to protect minority populations. Given the bitter bitterness between the two sides that the war had, not only the war, but even before that time, you had such suspicion on both sides. We tried to at least, not necessarily having the ethnic Serb leaders agree with us, because I don't think they would, but understand that at least we cared about their security and prosperity. And I think when all was said and done, that they looked to the United States to help them and protect them, and to get the Kosovar Albanian leadership to think the same way.

Q: Can you speak a little more in detail of how you spoke with the Kosovar de facto government at the time of protecting the ethnic Serbs? Because you say, like, they look to you guys very frequently on how to make this democratic system. Were there ever points of like, no, we would not like to do this, or yes, this makes a lot of sense? Like, we just want to keep following the model you're giving us.

YAZDGERDI: First of all, we helped the Kosovar government draft their constitution. And within that constitution are strong guarantees for minority rights. You know, I think they understood that. They didn't, obviously didn't necessarily sell well politically for them. But we said it was absolutely, if you want to demonstrate, again, your willingness, your readiness to take on the mantle of statehood and be recognized by important countries like the United States, you need to do this. And I think when all is said and done, I think they understood that. If not, not loving it, but understanding it. And actually implementing it. So, no, we didn't always get agreement with them. They sometimes thought, you know, the ethnic Serb minority was getting too much, too many rights that other countries didn't provide, their minorities. But given, again, what the two sides had gone through, it was absolutely critical, it was imperative that they demonstrate this. And so I think, yeah, there were a lot of discussions on that. But I think in the end, they realized that that was the way they had to go. It was not only the right thing to do, but it was the expedient thing to do if they wanted to get recognition.

Q: Thank you. And you also spoke about how you, you don't want to be the only country kind of like going up to bat, so you need your other allies on your side. Were there any international campaigns that you guys have done for other great powers to recognize them, aside from you, or talks, like what is, what did it look like to kind of make sure you were not standing alone?

YAZDGERDI:Yeah. Well, let me give you an example of that and when it was the most exciting time in my career. So, in the fall of 2007, I went to our ambassador, Tina Kaidanow, and I said, you know, we know they're going to declare independence sometime in early-2008. We're not exactly sure of the date, and we don't know exactly how they're going to do it. So she said, yes, why don't you go talk to the staffs of the president and prime minister and find out what they have planned. And so we met with them. I met with them on a near-weekly basis, and then as the date became clear what they were going to do drew near, which turned out to be February 17th, we would meet on a daily basis.

I remember always saying to them, you need to show the world that you're serious,

because on February 17th, CNN, BBC, all the major media will all be trained on Kosovo. You have to know what, you have to look like you know what you're doing. You have to. It's important. And then on the international side, we lined up support. You know, our big allies, the UK, Germany, France, Japan, Canada, Australia. We wanted them to recognize immediately and help us make the argument. After they declared independence, we even sent out messages from Washington to our embassies in countries that had not recognized to encourage them to do so, or to at least answer questions on why they refused to do so. And so that was a concerted effort that was worldwide.

But I also remember that Kosovo had to choose a flag and national anthem. Which was really a fascinating experience. They wanted an American to sit on that committee. I was that American. And it was incredible. I have to say the process itself was, was open and transparent because I was there, I saw it. We advised the Kosovar-Albanian leadership, look, when you choose your flag, don't choose just Albanian national colors, the red and black. Because how will that look to your ethnic minorities? Don't do that. And we said, please don't choose red, white, and blue. We know you love the United States, but that's not a good idea.Choose something that is forward looking, that is distinctive.

I remember anybody could provide a design for a flag, if they meet the technical criteria. By the way, the Kosovar-Albanian leadership agreed to not to have just red and black as a theme or red, white, and blue or some variation of the American flag. And people from our own embassy or office at that time, not an embassy yet, you know, it was fascinating. So we got a lot of submissions, and had a lot of discussions on which design looked the best. There was a Kosovar artist, I'm forgetting his name now, but, who had submitted something. Now, he had submitted basically the EU flag with Kosovo in the middle. And I remember we said, okay, that's forward looking, that seems good. But, we checked with Brussels, and the response was it's too much like our flag and they wouldn't agree.

So we went back to this artist and said, is there some way that you could modify it? We liked the idea. We liked the fact that, you know, Kosovo wants to become part of the European family of nations and take its part in the EU and NATO and so forth. And so he came back with a really brilliant idea, I thought. So he kept the EU blue, you know, as a background. And, he had the map of Kosovo in EU gold in the center, but instead of the circle of stars, he just had six white stars in a semi-circle above the flag, representing the six main ethnic groups of Kosovo. Now, who could be against that? And it flew with Brussels. And, that was the design that won. And so the Kosovar government had a company in Turkey produce tens of thousands of these flags to hand out. And by the way, the population had not seen this design yet. They had not seen it. And so, that was the first time they actually saw the flag on, on actual Independence Day. So, that was a fascinating experience for me.

On the anthem, it was also interesting. Most anthems are very martial, and the United States is no different. It's about bloodshed, struggle, and bombs bursting in air. Very, very military. Again this was open to the public to submit proposals and of course, most people submitted words to the anthem, they all basically reflected war and struggle. And we thought, the committee as a whole thought, and I agreed with this, does Kosovo want

to have an anthem with these sort of militaristic, aggressive words as their anthem? Because, obviously, it looked like it would be directed at someone. So, I remember we came up with the idea, and of course, the Kosovars were free to accept it or not, not to have any words to the anthem. Why don't you just have a theme, a song, you know, just music? I became an expert on national anthems. Spain, for example, has a national anthem that has no words. So, it wasn't unprecedented. And so, you know, we made that pitch to the, to the committee, and they accepted it.

It turned out it was a Kosovar composer, who actually put something very stately and dignified that sounded like a national anthem. Other submissions were kind of funny. I remember one submission was a guy singing opera. We're listening to this composer's piece and this guy's got talent.

Q: (Laughing) Kosovo's Got Talent.

YAZDGERDI: Yeah. It was like that. It really was. We couldn't help but laugh at some points. But, we listened to this one and we're like, wow, that met the criteria. I think that made the most sense. Even up to this day, as far as I know, there are no words to the national anthem of Kosovo. So, anyway, that was fascinating for me, because I actually saw the making of both the flag and national anthem.

Q: That's very interesting. I just have to go back a little bit. Obviously, you sent out letters to, like, your allies, to encourage them to recognize. Did you, before you recognized Kosovo, did you know, kind of, like, confirm that there were people going to do it after you were? And, like, how, I don't know if you know dates, but, how fast was the second one and then, like, how quickly others dropped, and, you know, how quickly other countries started to recognize?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah, yes, yes. That's a good question. You know, you wanted to have as many recognitions as possible on the date of independence. So, I think, we had, of course, kept a tally of which countries would recognize. Either they had told us they would or they likely would. And, we did not want the United States to be the first country to recognize it. So, I think we, I think we asked Costa Rica to be the first, and begin helping to prepare the ground for recognition. So, the day that Kosovo declared, immediately, there were dozens and dozens of recognitions by some major countries, including, of course, the United States, the UK, Germany, France, Japan, Australia. Now some major countries did not and still have not, Russia and China are the two biggest, I think.

But, at the end of the day something like, 80 countries were lined up to support, to recognize Kosovo. Which, really, there probably isn't a single more important factor than countries willing to recognize Kosovo. That was the most important thing. So, we realized that was the priority. We made it a priority and I think we had a good outcome. Again, there are countries that have not recognized Kosovo for various reasons. Greece, Romania, Slovakia, I think Spain still. So, again, you know, the sad thing is when you've not recognized and years have gone by, those positions tend to harden. They just kind of stay the way they are. I'm hoping that won't be the case. In fact, when I was Balkan's

director at the State Department from 2014 to 2016, it was still a priority to get countries to recognize Kosovo. We would get one here or two there and it's still an ongoing effort. But, I think at this point, the fact that so many countries, both in terms of the quantity and the size of these countries, really buttressed the fact that Kosovo was a real country. So, yeah, we took that very seriously and, and again, used every lever to convince countries that hadn't recognized to do so.

Q: In more detail, can you talk about how you pitched it towards other people and how Kosovo kind of sold, like, what are the benefits? They're an EU nominee. How are they, like, these are, this is what we can offer you. Sometimes economic stability is a big one.

YAZDGERDI: I think we argued all those points. I think the key point though was, this would, this was important not only to the people of Kosovo, but also to the stability of the region. That was our main argument. It was, even though we knew Serbia was opposed and still is. We thought that this was really the only way to bring stability to the region. So we argued very strongly on that. Kind of hand in hand with that, we wanted to show that by, by Kosovo declaring independence, being recognized by a number of countries, it could help push the region as a whole to eventual EU membership and for the countries who sought it, NATO membership. The two, sort of, pillars of European prosperity and stability. And so, we argued in that sense as well, that we hope they share the view that this is another step in having the region get away from its bloody past and actually look forward to membership in the EU and NATO, for those who choose to join. That was a powerful argument I thought. Leaving, things as they are would just at some point blow up again into conflict. So, that's how we made the argument.

Q: Yeah. So, I do have a question then. Before you, there's a lot about how this, kind of, confirmed regional stability. Were there any significant calculated risks that you were, that you know that the stability outweighed what you were, could have possibly anticipated?

YAZDGERDI: That's a really good question. And there was, obviously we weren't, the United States and its allies, friends, we weren't certain how Serbia would react. We had, of course, an embassy in Belgrade. We kept very in close touch with them too, and they would provide us and the department with information of what was going on there. We knew, of course, hoping that the reaction would not be violent. And that, if we could get that to be the case, I think we'd be ahead of the game. It turned out it was violent, directed at our embassy. In fact, part of our embassy was burned in Belgrade. And, unfortunately, the only person who died was a Serb from Kosovo. He actually got caught between the front door and what we call the hard line to the interior of the embassy. He burned to death, which was awful. And so, you know, unfortunately, we learned later that, you know, those local security forces who were supposed to protect the embassy just melted away when these crowds all of a sudden, you know, sort of, materialized outside the embassy. And that was a calculated risk. We were sorry for the loss of life, even for one single person. But, thankfully that was kind of it. There was no mass violence. So, it was a calculated risk, but we thought it was worth taking. Because I think if we had gone another way, I think there would have been much greater violence. So, yeah. And, it was

a bit of a scary time, though. We didn't know exactly how Russia would react. We didn't know exactly how China would react. You know, you don't know until you actually go through it. And, but on the whole, while it was unfortunate what happened in Belgrade, at least there wasn't any sort of mass violence against the declaration of independence.

Q: And you said you were at the Hague. Did you ever attend negotiations?

YAZDGERDI: No, that was for other folks in the government that would deal with that, especially Ambassador Wisner for the status talks.

Q: So, you talked about ways you've advised Kosovo to kind of have this more like democratic, legitimate platform in the ways of ethnic minorities. You've had a big role in the flag and the national anthem. None of it was obviously without their agreement, but in a nation so ready for independence and looking at the U.S. kind of for this framework, how do you kind of calculate the ethical lines of, like the balance of not impeding on the people you are advising?

YAZDGERDI: I'm sorry, the ethical balance on?

Q: Just like not impeding the people you're advising.

YAZDGERDI: Not impeding their—well, when all is said and done, it was their decision to make. Yes. It was. And they weren't shy about letting us know their views, which is fine, but I think when we were able to sort of demonstrate why we were pursuing a certain course of action, you know, by and large they would agree. They had questions and they would give us counterarguments sometimes. If I can recall, you know, it wasn't something that they just sort of agreed to and that was it. There was a discussion and I think that's the essence of diplomacy, too, that we were able to get the Kosovars to sort of focus on why this was important, what, you know, what our view was. And I think they very much respected our view as a big international partner to help them and we were very happy to do that because we saw it certainly in our interests as well. So, I don't know, when you say ethical line, I don't really see it as an ethical line. I saw a willingness to help forestall more violence in the Balkans. Maybe we overreached in some cases. We may have. You know, when all of a sudden they have to live with the decision. But I think on the whole we were able to come to an agreement. There weren't any, as far as I knew, any real significant open issues in which we could not find agreement.

Q: Did the U.S. communicate with the E.U., the U.N., or NATO as a precursor of the recognition to also help you kind of with the steps?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah. I remember former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari who was head of the Kosovo status talks for the international community. And, we worked very closely with him. You know, when all was said and done it was his decision to make on what was the best course of action. And the decision he decided to make was supervised independence. Now, when the Kosovars heard that phrase it's like, they asked supervised by whom? Why? When you declare independence you're independent. I can understand

that, but that's what they had to deal with. So, when I tell you that they, didn't agree with everything the international community had decided, this was an example But I think once they realized that supervised independence first of all would not be forever, it ended I think in 2012 which Kosovo really could demonstrate that it had the wherewithal and use the help that's being offered by the UN, by the EU, by the United States, and others. And I think once that was sort of put in that phrase in that way I think the government understood.

Now, it's interesting because the current prime minister of Kosovo was very much against supervised independence and he actually led demonstrations some of which actually turned violent and some people were killed in the Vetëvendosje Movement, or self-determination movementAnd that they were very much against the international community, functioning under this, supervised independence structure. They didn't like it at all. They were a minority I think of opinion but they were a vocal minority and they unfortunately encouraged some to commit acts of violence which KFOR had to respond to. So, I don't want to give you the sense that everybody agreed all the time with everything that either the international community or the United States proposed.

Q: You mentioned how you knew the day that they were getting independence and the meeting, the frequency you met with them shortened. It would be like you met once a week and then you met daily. How did you and maybe other international members- what was the shift that was like this is their time–they're going to get independence, that they're going to stand on their feet? How did you kind of know this is it?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah, in our conversations. There was a new government that came in from the 2007 elections and they came into power in January of 2008. So, we were very interested in hearing exactly which date they wanted to and then work toward that date and again there wasn't a lot of time between the new government coming in and this actual declaration. But even before that we had contacts in all parties that agreed with this process including the opposition party that came into power in 2008. So, we had a pretty good sense that it would be sometime in early 2008. We then had conversations with political leaders and were able to know exactly which date would be chosen and what they would propose to do. And that was also fascinating because again as I say it's not every day that you know the world media is focused on this small country in Southeast Europe right?

I remember we had discussions with staffs of the President and Prime Minister who were by and large excellent. They were really quite adept at what they did and they were imbued with this feeling we are actually doing something historic. And I remember one of the first ideas was to have everybody in the Kosovo Parliament, some 120 members, give a speech. We thought well if you want our opinion that’s probably not the best use of your time. Why not just have the President, the Prime Minister, and the leader of the opposition speak?And they accepted that. But they wanted to mimic what our founding fathers in the United States had done so they actually bought this big piece of parchment. (And by the way it turned out the winning bid was from an American company).

So they put the Declaration of Independence on this parchment, in the two official languages, Albanian and Serbian, and they had everyone sign like our founding fathers did. And so I thought that was an incredibly good idea.Why not let everybody take part right. So every MP went up there and signed but it didn't take forever and the image was nice. You know they had a concert that would play the national anthem for the first time and you know they had this big sign that said “Newborn” in the center of Pristina. I remember that day was really cold out, very cold, you know but it was such an exciting time you barely felt it. And I remember I asked my friends and relatives who saw that on CNN, how did it look? And they said it looked amazing. The newest country in the world and it looked legitimate and proper. Again, for getting countries to recognize you if they saw the clips from CNN or BBC or whatever major media outlet it looked like these folks knew what they were doing and they were going to make this work. And they did.

Q: I just have a few closing wrap-up questions. You were there a year after independence as well. What was that like, were you assigned the leave? How did you feel when you left? How was the come down of it all?

YAZDGERDI: Yeah I was at there at time of independence in 2008 and then I became DCM in summer of 2008afterthe previous DCM volunteered for duty in IraqThere was a rule basically that said in our Foreign Service that if you volunteered for duty in Afghanistan or Iraq you could go, no questions asked. No one could tell you that you had to stay. So he went and there was an opening. Someone of course there was an effort to fill that position, but the person that was supposed to come had some health reasons. Ambassador Kaidanow, who remained a good friend of mine and who I deeply respected, said she wanted to see if she could get the assignments committee to consider me. So the last year of my time in Kosovo was as the Deputy Chief of Mission. I had to shift gears a little bit. I wasn't so involved in the day-to-day sort of things that I was as Political-Economic Chief, but dealt more with representational and managerial issues.

I remember in the year after that whatever the government did had incredible symbolic value. It was all new. And the government was accepting credentials of ambassadors whose countries had recognized Kosovo and who were establishing missions in Kosovo. So I was involved with that as well. And it was also just consolidating the government's ability to do the things it said it would do, particularly with regard to minority rights and particularly with ethnic Serbs. There were still some problems. There still remain problems. Not, of course, all of the Kosovar government's doing, but they just had to deal with these problems, especially north of the Ibar River, in Mitrovica. It was still a pretty tense place. It still is to this day. So it was all constantly monitoring that situation to make certain that it didn't explode.

So even ethnic Serb leaders regarded us as, as sort of an honest broker in the United States, even though, you know, they were very much opposed to independence for Kosovo. They still regarded us as, you know, a trusted confidant to the extent they could say, Hey, we have a real problem here. The government is doing this and it's against what they said they would do. We would step in and, and, and many times they were right. Sometimes, the government was not living up to its commitments – and so we would step

in and sort of intercede with the government and say, look, you know, you promised to do this and you're not doing it. So, a lot of my time in the last year was kind of spent doing that as well.

Q: And then how did you feel when it all closed up, when you were going home, the homecoming of it all?

YAZDGERDI: You know, it was funny. I'll read you, in fact, I'll read you a little bit of the farewell email I sent to the folks in Washington that I had worked so closely with, including people like Rosemary DiCarlo and Stuart Jones and our desk officer and a whole bunch of some of the people in the international community.

So I said, "It's my last day in the office and I just want to say it's been a real pleasure working with you all. Looking back on my three years here, it's incredible all the things we've been able to accomplish together. Status process, change of government, independence, managing post-independence craziness, recognitions, constitution, World Bank, IMF membership, Miss Kosova and the top ten at the Miss Universe pageant, just to name a few. Seriously, I look back on my tour here as by far the most rewarding and satisfying in my Foreign Service career and you are all an integral part of it."

You know, sometimes in your Foreign Service career you will do really interesting things, but it's really unique, I think, to be present at the creation of a new country. And so I've done some interesting things, I did some interesting things before Kosovo and after Kosovo, but nothing that speaks to the uniqueness of that particular point in time. It's true. And so after Kosovo, I thought, you know, maybe it's time to look at another region and do something completely different. So I decided to do that, I decided to learn Farsi. My father was born in Iran, but I never learned Farsi. So we have what's called an Iran Watcher program around the world. And at the time, we had a section in the, a political section in Baghdad that dealt with Iran affairs. And so I got to learn a year of Farsi. And I could actually then speak to my father in his native language, which he very much liked. And I went to Iraq to serve in 2010-11. So I thought it was a good move because it was time to do something else. I had been in the Balkan region for quite some time. I kind of expanded my horizons, so to speak. I learned a new language and just sort of developed a new set of skills. In terms of knowing the region and the people and the cultures of that area.

Q: Thank you. To jump to now, it's been a bit since they've gotten independence, are there any historical accounts that you can draw on that you find relevant now?

YAZDGERDI: To be successful at diplomacy you need to always remember to put yourself in the other person's shoes. You have to do that. And I remember sometimes it was hard to do that in Kosovo. We were asking sometimes for them to do things that were really difficult. And if you put yourself in their position, it made you realize maybe there was another way or something could be done to help them do it. That could get both of you to yes. And so for me, we did that on a daily basis with the Kosovar leadership and with the ethnic Serb leaders as well.

I think that's really something you can actually use in anything you do, not only in the Foreign Service, but pretty much any walk of life. The fact that we were really taking an interest in someone's situation like we did with the people of Kosovo, including its ethnic Serbs, and making certain we are sensitive to their concerns and hopes. people that make that country up. And I think if by doing that, we were able to win a lot of hearts and minds

Q: Last question. Given that there's still animosity between Serbia and Kosovo, do you have any lessons you have learned that could advise peace talks now?

YAZDGERDI: You're right. There's still animosity. There's still deep suspicion. … Trying to, and I found this to be the case working with ethnic Serb leaders in Kosovo itself, find things that appeal to them on a small level and build some trust, you know? You can't expect a lot of times to just go into somewhere and just have them accept everything without building that trust. You need to… And so for me, the United States and the European Union have tried very hard over the years to try to build that trustAt points, they look like there might have been a breakthrough. It always seems to have fallen apart, but I think you have to keep at it. You have to always build that trust because when all is said and done, these people are there and they have to live with one another. I'm a real believer that everybody wants the same things,We want peace. We want stability. We want a good life. We want our children to be educated and for our children to do better than we did. That's a normal thing. That's a normal, universal feeling. If you can tap into that and show that this way that we're thinking of actually will lead to that, regardless of all the political baggage and the things you feel compelled to say, you can get there. But again, that also takes political leaders that have some courage, right? Because even now, any Serbian leader that says I'm in favor of Kosovo independence, their career would be over. They can't say that. But you don't have to say that. You can start to do things that recognize the aspirations of people that actually live in Kosovo, including the ethnic Serbs. So it's a difficult issue, but I think that's really the only way forward.

Q: Very beautiful answer. And lastly, is there anything I missed you'd like to speak about?

YAZDGERDI: I don't think so. I think I've said everything I wanted. It was just an incredible odyssey, those three years in Kosovo. It was only supposed to be two years, but I extended a third year because I just liked it so much and the work we were doing. So again, I would wish for those who are interested in a Foreign Service career, you get to do things like this. Maybe not be present necessarily at the creation of a new country, but you can do incredible things that promote American interests, but also hopefully add to the peace and stability and prosperity of the world. That's what we're interested in, too. So I hope that would be an attractive element for those who might be considering a Foreign Service career.

Q: Thank you so much for your time today.

End of interview