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Serbia's foreign minister says his government is encouraged by signs of opposition in some European countries to recognizing Kosovo as independent and believes that Western negotiators could compromise on the future of the breakaway province.

Vuk Jeremic said Thursday in an interview with The Associated Press that Serbia would use a new period of negotiations over the future of the breakaway province to press for a solution short of independence_ a position that is unlikely to resonate in talks in Washington on Friday.

Jeremic is scheduled to meet with officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who have said repeatedly that the United States supports international recognition of Kosovo's independence soon.

This week, Rice assured officials from Kosovo that the U.S. would move to recognize Kosovo soon after a new period of international negotiations. She is expected to repeat the position to Jeremic and to tell him that Serbia can speed up its integration with Western Europe by letting go of Kosovo.

But Jeremic seized on recent indications that some European countries are uncomfortable recognizing Kosovo without approval of the United Nations Security Council.

The EU's 27 members have been generally united in their support for a U.N. resolution that would empower the union to deploy its mission to the province and replace the current U.N. administration there, as part of a scheme of supervised independence.

Still, some members such as Spain, Slovakia, Greece and Cyprus have expressed reservations about the prospect of Kosovo gaining independence without a U.N. Security

Council resolution — unlikely in the face of Russian opposition.

Although Kosovo remains a province of Serbia, it has been under U.N. and NATO administration since a 78-day NATO-led air war halted a Serb crackdown on ethnic Albanian separatists in 1999.

In April, the U.N.'s special envoy on Kosovo, Martti Ahtisaari, recommended Kosovo be granted internationally supervised independence.

There are concerns that the EU could split over the issue if it remains unresolved. Following a conference of EU foreign ministers in Brussels this week, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said that the officials had not reached a consensus.

Last week, the United States and the EU were forced to withdraw their latest draft of a resolution on Kosovo's future from the Security Council. Russia, a veto-wielding member of the council, opposed the resolution on the grounds that it was a hidden route to independence.

"There are a growing number of countries who realize that the cost of imposing a solution outside the security council is high and are therefore starting to think about whether there could be a more optimal solution," Jeremic said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin repeated his country's position on Kosovo on Friday, saying that "today, Serbs are asserting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their country."

"Our position is well known. Peace in Europe cannot be built without taking into consideration the fundamental norms of international law, including the fundamental principles of the Helsinki Accords," he said while accepting the credentials of the new Serbian ambassador, Stanimir Vukicevic, at a Kremlin ceremony.

U.S. and European officials have agreed to allow 120 days for further negotiations that would

include talks with Kosovo and Serbia in a last attempt to reach an agreement.

Though expressing pro-American sentiments, Jeremic was critical of the U.S. negotiating position on Kosovo.

"If you are pushing parties in the negotiations, then it doesn't make much sense that you are announcing in advance what should be the outcome of these negotiations," he said.

He also criticized repeated U.S. assertions that further delays in granting independence to Kosovo could lead to violence by ethnic Albanians frustrated by the process.

"It's a very dangerous thing, if we are talking about the frustration of an ethnic community at the non-delivery of their maximalist demands and the threat of violence," he said. "Threatening violence should not be tolerated by the international community."

He said that Serbia was committed to integrating in Western Europe and would not resort to violence whatever the outcome.

"Serbia is committed to peace and will stay committed to peace under any circumstances," he said.

But Serbia will not accept Kosovo's independence.

"No sovereign democratic country in the world would be prepared to accept independence and infringing of its own sovereignty," he said.