

INDEPENDENT MONTENEGRO: COMPLETING THE BALKAN AGENDA
CSIS U.S.-Montenegro Policy Forum

June 21, 2005
Washington, D.C.

On 21 June 2005, the CSIS East Europe Project hosted a roundtable in the U.S.-Montenegro Policy Forum series focusing on the referendum on Montenegrin independence planned for Spring 2006. The meeting, chaired by CSIS East Europe Project director Janusz Bugajski, featured Montenegro's Foreign Minister Miodrag Vlahovic, who outlined the country's progress toward statehood and reviewed some of the important challenges faced by officials in Podgorica in the context of the evolving international environment.

In his introductory remarks, Janusz Bugajski described 2005 as a defining period for Serbia-Montenegro, saying that there is an urgent need for a final status for both Montenegro and Serbia in order to move the region toward lasting stability and development. He stated his personal support for an "amicable divorce," arguing that statehood is essential for Montenegro's progress and its Euro-Atlantic future. Bugajski believes that the current ambiguous and inefficient status of the union only encourages Eurosceptics and anti-enlargers.

Minister Miodrag Vlahovic detailed how Montenegro has twice postponed its decision on a referendum, first through the creation of the state union with Serbia in 2002, brokered by the EU, and second, through a reluctant acceptance of the starting date of the union as February 2003 instead of 2002. Although he gave Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Foreign Policy, credit for his efforts to stabilize the region, Vlahovic insisted that Serbia's latest efforts to avoid a referendum are misguided and unacceptable, and that it is critical to stick to the scheduled date. He attributed the failure of EU countries to fully engage Montenegro to two main causes: first, an unjustified fear of destabilizing Kosovo, and second, the internal crisis caused by the recent referenda on the EU Constitution in France and the Netherlands.

Minister Vlahovic portrayed Kosovo and Montenegro as distinct issues, and described Montenegro's own efforts to promote peace and democracy in the former Yugoslavia. He expressed hope for a peaceful resolution to the Kosovo issue and for the protection of minority rights. He called Montenegro the only country in the region with a strong multi-ethnic political model, and said that there is no reason to anticipate violence or chaos connected with the referendum. Montenegro also maintains good relations with all countries in the region and supports the ongoing war crimes process in The Hague.

Regarding the referendum, Vlahovic predicted that the required 51 percent turnout will be met and even exceeded. The international community and particularly the United States are welcome to send monitors and the media should also play a prominent role. Montenegro does not expect any special treatment and that it will comply with EU requirements and standards, such as status, minority rights, and a turnout minimum. Vlahovic rejected recent efforts by Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica to

interfere with the referendum by supplying the EU with a list of around 250,000 Montenegrins allegedly living in Serbia. According to Kostunica, these people should have the right to vote in the referendum, although this contradicts the Montenegrin constitution. The Montenegrin high court has declared that only residents of Montenegro have the right to vote in order to avoid a double franchise. Vlahovic also compared Kostunica's list to a tactic used by Slobodan Milosevic during the 1990s to intimidate the Croatian minority in Vojvodina.

Minister Vlahovic noted a number of recent improvements in Montenegro's relations with the EU and the United States, citing his recent visits to the UN and Strasbourg, as well as Washington. He perceived a growing consensus in favor of a peaceful and democratic move for statehood in Montenegro, as well as a new realism among policymakers. The Montenegrin authorities hope that the U.S. will not take sides in the referendum, but will simply become more actively engaged politically and economically in the region. Vlahovic complained that Montenegro is still unfairly barred by Serbia from moving toward NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and called for both the EU and the US to take a more active role in regional questions besides Kosovo. He expressed a fear that the EU could turn inward to confront its own constitutional issues, and will not pay sufficient attention to external problems. The weakening of the EU would be a huge setback for all Balkan countries.

Discussion

Alternatives to Independence: Minister Vlahovic stated that Montenegro has only two viable options. One is full independence, and the other is a complete restructuring of the relationship with Serbia. For example, the two states could remain in a union while being recognized as separate countries internationally. Vlahovic blamed the Union parliament for stifling Montenegro's economic development, and argued that an equal bilateral relationship with Serbia is impossible as Serbia is so much larger than Montenegro.

Viability of an Independent Montenegro: Although Montenegro is a small state, Vlahovic claimed it possesses considerable economic potential. It remained a significant tourist destination even during the worst years of the 1980s, due to its beautiful mountains and coasts. There are also numerous opportunities to invest in the country's transportation sector and its deep-water port. He also pointed to Montenegro's success in promoting industry, building infrastructure, and creating a stable budget without international help or Serbian involvement. Montenegro already pays 20 percent more than its share to support the Union and particularly the military. The Union itself has been highly inefficient and has thwarted foreign investment into Montenegro, particularly from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

New Embassies: Although statehood will incur many costs, such as the need to maintain dozens of new embassies, Vlahovic noted that Montenegro is owed its proportional share of the \$40 million in the Serbian National Bank, which would probably add \$3-4 million to the annual budget. He predicted that new embassies would be set up in a modern and cost-efficient way, in coordination with the embassies of other countries in the region,

and that Montenegro would not need to budget more than \$10 million per year for this process. Austria and Hungary are already planning to open a joint embassy in Podgorica and Montenegro is training future diplomats in anticipation of independence.

Receptiveness in Washington: Vlahovic said that he is reassured by his latest visit that the U.S. remains d willing to play a constructive role in Montenegro. He believes that attitudes in Washington have grown more realistic and that new ideas being suggested are more detailed than on previous visits.

Receptiveness in Europe: Vlahovic said that there are many differences and nuances in how EU member states are responding to potential Montenegrin independence. There is widespread respect for the idea of a peaceful referendum process, perhaps more so in light of the recent referenda in Western Europe. Most of the problems concern specifics about implementation and not the overall process. Relations with France have particularly improved, which gives the quest for statehood more legitimacy. Javier Solana has cautioned that independence will not guarantee automatic accession to the EU, and may actually hinder the process. Vlahovic said this is understood in Podgorica, but that independence remains a higher priority for the government than EU integration and the two aims are not seen as incompatible.

Montenegrin Diaspora: Vlahovic was firm regarding the need to stick to the date and the existing laws for the referendum. He expressed outrage at PM Kostunica's attempts to get involved in the process by submitting a list of Montenegrins resident in Serbia to the EU. Vlahovic asserted that the Serbian media should investigate this matter further and wondered on what ethnic principles Kostunica compiled this information. However, he pointed out that through his clumsy maneuver Kostunica seems to have implicitly recognized the existence of a Montenegrin nation.

Montenegrin Referendum: Vlahovic predicted a comfortable majority in favor of independence as well as a high turnout. He insisted that the appropriate laws would be strictly applied and noted that even the Socialist People's Party, which opposes independence, now supports the referendum.