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Montenegro: Steps Toward an Independence Referendum
U.S. – Montenegrin Policy Forum
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On 17 October 2005, the CSIS East Europe Project hosted a roundtable in the U.S.-Montenegro Policy Forum series entitled “Montenegro: Steps Toward an Independence Referendum.” 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 toward EU and NATO integration in view of the October 10 decision by the EU Council of

Ministers to open twin-track talks with Serbia-Montenegro on a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA).

Foreign Minister Miodrag Vlahovic began his remarks by stating that Montenegro authorities are determined to hold an independence referendum in the spring of 2006. The opportunity for a referendum will open up as soon as the EU-sponsored Belgrade Agreement expires on 6 February 2006. The referendum, in his view, is a necessary step in order to define the status of Montenegro and that it would be organized in a transparent way in line with European standards.

Minister Vlahovic pointed out that the Montenegrin government refuses to succumb to pressures to postpone the referendum. He countered the opinion voiced in some EU countries that an independence referendum would destabilize Serbia. On the contrary, he asserted, it would be worse for Serbia if the issues of Montenegro and Kosovo remain unsolved. According to the foreign minister, it is wrong to claim “Serbia should not lose two states at the same time” and emphasized that Montenegro has never been a part of Serbia.



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However, he noted that insisting on holding the referendum does not mean that Podgorica is unaware of the complexities of the region, especially the pending issue of Kosovo's status. But he stated that Montenegro dismisses the supposition that the referendum on independence is connected to the Kosovo question. Vlahovic does not share the position of the European Union that Montenegro's status should be negotiated only after the Kosovo problem is resolved. Montenegro, he said, cannot readjust its own democratic process because there is still no date for settlement of the Kosovo issue.

Minister Vlahovic then went on to explain different approaches to achieving Montenegrin independence. He admitted that the internal situation remains divided. The latest opinion polls show that 43 percent of the population is for statehood, while 35 percent is against, with the rest still undecided. Vlahovic said that what is discouraging is that the efforts of the government to have any political dialogue with opponents of the referendum remain futile. Claiming to be backed by the European Union, the anti-independence opposition has suggested postponing the referendum or even boycotting it, which is not a helpful position in view of the current circumstances.

The foreign minister also addressed the recently signed Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU. He assured that Montenegro gives all necessary attention and information to participate in this process. He rejected the argument that Montenegro assumes that through independence it would gain faster accession to the EU. Instead he insisted that Montenegro's independent status is a precondition for entry into the Union since Montenegro does not want to accede as a territory or province controlled by another country with different interests and goals.

Discussion

Serbia's reaction to developments in Kosovo and Montenegro

According to Foreign Minister Vlahovic, the political situation remains fragile in Serbia although it may be heading in the right direction and against radicalism. Serbia should be incentivized in a helpful way in order to move forward faster. Belgrade should define its own political agenda and Serbia's problems have to be resolved within its own borders, while Montenegrin problems should be addressed within Montenegro's borders.





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Kosovo and U.S. involvement

Vlahovic commented on a noticeable trend whereby the agendas of Serbian citizens and politicians markedly differ, with ordinary people being insufficiently concerned with the issues of Kosovar and Montenegrin independence. Vlahovi said though that until Kosovo's status is resolved there is a risk of conflict; hence, 2006 will be a decisive year for the territory. He added that Montenegro should not be a part of the negotiations but would be very glad to see the issue resolved. The foreign minister expressed his delight with the renewed American interest in the Balkan region. He noted that U.S. involvement in the Balkans, even when using harsher methods, achieves positive outcomes for the stability and development of the region.

Montenegro's position on the EU Stabilization and Association Agreement

Vlahovic expressed Montenegro's full commitment to the requirements of the SAA. He noted that each country should be involved in its own way in the process toward EU integration. The primary goal of Montenegro is to carry out reforms successfully and not to minimize the time until accession. Montenegro still has to face problems along and across its borders such as organized crime and trafficking. He pointed out that the SAA and the referendum should not be misused against each other. The EU cannot count on the possibility that the SAA can be used as a tool to postpone the referendum.

EU accession date

According to Vlahovic, if Montenegro were to stay together with Serbia it would take anywhere from 10 to 12 years to enter the EU. He reemphasized that faster EU accession is not the motivation for Montenegro wanting to separate itself from Serbia. Podgorica does not mind if Serbia or Kosovo gain membership in the EU before Montenegro because every country has to follow its own path.

Alternatives to independence

Vlahovic emphasized the dysfunctional nature of the current State Union and underlined that there is no viable alternative to independence. Through statehood, Montenegro will have a simpler political system than that of the cumbersome federal structure, and the country's institutions will be more transparent and less costly. He added that the process would be more of a psychological issue for Serbia than a practical one.