

U.S. - Montenegro Policy Forum
MONTENEGRO'S APPROACHING INDEPENDENCE
REFERENDUM

Featuring
Montenegro's Foreign Minister Miodrag Vlahovic
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Following a long awaited green light by the EU, the Montenegrin parliament has officially set May 21 as the date for a referendum on the republic's independence. At a CSIS forum on 17 March guest speaker Miodrag Vlahovic, Montenegro's Minister of Foreign Affairs, outlined the international and domestic context of the upcoming national ballot. He noted that in order to have a positive result at least 55 percent of the population has to support the restoration of Montenegro's statehood. Vlahovic's remarks focused on several concrete issues of concern.

EU Stabilization and Association Process

Minister Vlahovic talked about Serbia's deficient cooperation with the ICTY with regard to the extradition of the indicted war criminal General Ratko Mladic as a serious obstacle, which slows down the Stabilization and Association Agreement talks with the EU. According to him, it might lead also to the suspension of SAA negotiations for the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. He asserted that Podgorica should not be held responsible for the behavior of Serbian authorities and he stressed that delays in the SAA process rebound negatively on Montenegro. Should the independence referendum succeed, Montenegro will be fully responsible for negotiating its own SAA agreement on the path to EU membership.

Balkan Stability

The Foreign Minister said that it is an exaggeration to discuss a potential domino effect as a consequence of Montenegrin independence. In his view, Montenegro's and Kosovo's final status resolutions should be judged according to their individual merits. Balkan stability is primarily jeopardized by outstanding and unresolved issues and by ambiguous political and legal frameworks.

Belgrade's Reaction

According to Foreign Minister Vlahovic, Montenegro's independence is misunderstood in Belgrade, but the question should not be misused internally or manipulated to promote a particular political agenda. Montenegro's main message to Serbia is that after the May referendum the first priority will be to establish a special relationship with Belgrade based on equality and mutual respect. He stressed that the referendum should not be considered as a zero sum game. Despite the belief that once Montenegro becomes independent Serbia will lose its access to the Adriatic Sea, the Montenegrin authorities have assured Belgrade that they will encourage free movement of people and goods between the two states as this will be economically advantageous for both countries.

Referendum Scenarios

The Foreign Minister said that although the government in Podgorica expects a successful and legitimate referendum, Montenegrin officials are reviewing other possible scenarios. If support for independence should fall between 50 and 55 percent, this could open numerous questions about the definition of a majority and majority-minority relations in Montenegro. But he expressed confidence that crisis and turmoil can be avoided through dialogue between Podgorica, Belgrade, and Brussels.

In Vlahovic's estimation, only if the referendum vote falls below 50 percent would the common state be consolidated. But he still believes that the dysfunctional union with Serbia does not have a future beyond the referendum. He noted that even within Serbia, support for a joint state is decreasing.

Economic Situation

Montenegro could be a promising new target for investors not only in sectors such as tourism and real estate, but also in transportation, manufacturing, and service industries. As soon as Montenegro eliminates ambiguities regarding its status and international recognition, this will increase investor confidence. Currently, there is a level of perceived political risk as a result of the lingering status questions in the region. But Vlahovic said that the overall macroeconomic outlook of the country is encouraging and the republic will be economically viable if it gains independence. Joint projects are on the table with Romania, Hungary, and other nearby states.

Euroatlantic Integration

About 80 percent of the population supports EU membership for Montenegro. Support for NATO membership is currently lower, standing at about 40 percent, which can be attributed to the NATO intervention in the 1990s and the ongoing debates about the future mission of the Alliance. Nevertheless, Montenegro is planning to conduct rigorous military reforms.

Montenegro's Image Abroad

Montenegro is working hard to improve its image abroad with regard to the issues of corruption and cross-border smuggling. The government has passed appropriate legislation, strengthened border controls, and the border guards have been provided with more sophisticated equipment thanks to the United States. In addition, the region's interior ministers recently signed an agreement to enhance cooperation in combating organized crime.