

Serbia Vows Kosovo Solution as Clinton Urges Peace Push

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Serb Premier Ivica Dacic vowed to seek peace with Kosovo as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Balkan leaders to improve relations two decades after they were engulfed by ethnic warfare.

Dacic, who met Clinton and European Union Foreign Policy Commissioner Catherine Ashton yesterday in Belgrade, said his willingness to seek a compromise by the end of his term is part of a commitment to securing the start of talks to become the third former Yugoslav republic to join the EU.

Making an agreement with the breakaway province is a key step in Serbia's goal of joining the 27-nation EU, which it needs to help tie its economy deeper to the rest of Europe after the bloody civil wars of the 1990s stunted the region's transformation from communism. EU President Herman Van Rompuy said Sept. 4 the country needs to improve its ties with Kosovo, while the European Commission said on Oct. 10 that Serbia hasn't made enough progress to start entry talks.

"We are committed to resolving all outstanding issues" with Kosovo "peacefully because generations after us do not deserve to have this problem unresolved," Dacic said yesterday. "Serbia will do what is necessary to fulfill the criteria to get the date for the start of EU accession talks."

Balkan Tour

Clinton and Ashton are on a joint U.S.-EU Balkan tour "to express our joint commitment towards Serbia," Ashton said yesterday.

"Serbia has made significant progress towards its European future and has become a candidate country" in March, she said.

Milica Delevic, a former chief of the EU Integrations Office and now the head of the Serbian Parliament's committee for EU integrations, said differences can be settled, securing the country's future in Europe.

"In a world laden with political and economic difficulties, this dialog is seen as a problem that can be resolved, possibly propelling the EU enlargement to the Balkans," Delevic said.

The two will travel today to Kosovo and neighboring Croatia, which is scheduled to join the EU on July 1, 2013. They began their Balkan tour in Bosnia-Herzegovina, whose government this month received criticism from the trading bloc.

Commission Findings

The country's consensus over European integration was lost and authorities failed to follow through with overhauling its institutions including the judiciary, the European Commission said Oct. 10.

Dacic, a former aide to the late strongman Slobodan Milosevic, who led Serbia during the Balkan Wars, said yesterday's meetings contained no ultimatums for Serbia, such as a demand for recognition of Kosovo as an independent nation.

"The EU isn't forcing us to do what we can't, which is to declare Kosovo's independence, but what we can do is to definitely make visible and sustainable progress in our dialog with Pristina," Kosovo's capital, Dacic said.

Clinton, who was First Lady when former President Bill Clinton led a military campaign to oust Serbia from Kosovo in 1999, acknowledged that dialog between the two sides “doesn’t require of Serbia the immediate recognition of Kosovo.

“It does, however, call for the two governments to move forward with practical agreements that serve the everyday security and economic interests of all the people of Serbia and Kosovo,” Clinton said.

Independence Declaration

Kosovo declared independence in 2008, a move that was recognized by the U.S. and 22 of the EU's 27 members. Serbia, which sees Kosovo as the cultural cradle of their nation, has vowed never to accept its independence.

Dacic’s political survival rests on how far he is willing to go to satisfy EU demands and not look soft on Kosovo, said political analysts including Vladimir Todoric of the Belgrade- based New Policy Centre.

Popular support in Serbia for EU membership fell, according to a Sept. 18-25 survey by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policies, with overall backing for the EU path down by 2 percentage points to 47 percent, while opposition to the EU rose 10 percentage points to 35 percent.

About 100 activists of two nationalist organizations held a peaceful demonstration in central Belgrade before Clinton’s visit to protest “snatching Kosovo away from Serbia,” the state news service Tanjug reported.

About 4,000 Serbian police officers were dispatched to the streets of Belgrade during the visit, which also included a meeting with President Tomislav Nikolic, another former Milosevic ally.

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