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## **AZERBAIJAN-MONTENEGRO RELATIONS STRENGTHEN WITH ENERGY PARTNERSHIP**

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Trends exclusive interview with Montenegrin Foreign Minister Srdjan Darmanovic.

Question: There are traditionally good relations between Azerbaijan and Montenegro. The two countries enjoy multifaceted cooperation in a number of sectors. Which spheres do you believe still need incentives?

Answer: Relations between Montenegro and Azerbaijan are friendly, with intensive and constructive dialogue at the highest political and working level. As a milestone of our traditionally good relations, President of Montenegro H.E. Mr. Filip Vujanović and President of Azerbaijan H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev signed the Declaration on Friendly Relations and Partnership in 2013. Lately, we have made significant steps in the field of public administration and signed the Memorandum on Cooperation in Public Administration, which will significantly support Montenegrin public administration reforms. During my recent visit to Azerbaijan in November 2017, and talks with the highest officials, we agreed that there are numerous possibilities for further strengthening of cooperation in the fields of agriculture, tourism, education, science, culture, sport, parliamentary cooperation.

Our bilateral relations have been further strengthened with strategic partnership in the sector of energy and recent successful Azerbaijans investments in the sectors of tourism, real estate and banking. The next meeting of the Joint Economic Committee, due to take place in Baku this year, will certainly contribute to concretization of further areas of cooperation.

Q.: Economy plays a major role in relations between countries. Do you think the trade turnover between Montenegro and Azerbaijan reflects the existing potential? What is going to be done to increase the trade turnover?

A.: Clearly, there is room for expanding trade. We welcome deepening of contacts between Montenegros Chambers of Economy and Azerbaijans Chamber of Trade and Industry, and we fully support organizing of business forums for Montenegrin and Azerbaijani companies, which would contribute to identifying concrete opportunities for business and trade.

Q.: Azerbaijan is in the top three of main investors of Montenegro. What about investing in Azerbaijan? Which sectors will be interesting for Montenegrin investors?

A.: Azerbaijan was the third largest investor in Montenegro in 2017. Projects such as Portonovi,

worth 100 million, by Azmont Investments, which is a part of Azerbaijan Global Investments (AGI), add important value to Montenegros aspiration to position itself as a luxury travel destination, and the Government of Montenegro is committed to supporting and promoting such investments. Azmont Investments recently announced the investment of 100 million in Portonovi in 2018, which will be their biggest annual investment in Montenegro since entering the market in 2012. We hope that the success of this important investment will be a signal to other investors from Azerbaijan to come and explore the opportunities for successful business.

When it comes to Montenegros businesses, I believe they have yet to discover Azerbaijan and its investment opportunities, which is what business forums are for. This is also a signal for our national Agencies for Promotion of Investment to work closer to promote opportunities our two countries clearly have in abundance.

Q.: Does Montenegro plan to deepen the energy segment of bilateral cooperation? Work is underway to implement the Southern Gas Corridor. What is your view of this projects role in ensuring Europes energy security? What will this project mean for Montenegro?

A.: The energy sector is one of the most dynamic and most promising sectors for investments in Montenegro and the Government of Montenegro is committed to the development of a diversified and resilient energy sector through the implementation of necessary reform activities and through its participation in regional and European energy markets. With the expected completion of the interconnection between Montenegro and Italy via an undersea electrical transmission cable and its linkage with the energy systems of the neighboring countries, Montenegro is on its way to become a regional energy hub for electricity, especially for energy from the renewable sources. Montenegro has substantial potential in the field of renewable energy sources, especially wind farms, small hydro plants, solar energy, biomass. The Southern Gas Corridor, or Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project, and its Adriatic-Ionian branch, known as IAP, are a significant contribution to the diversification of the energy sector not solely in Montenegro, but in all the countries involved. This project is very important from the aspect of security of energy supply, competitiveness and development of the region as a whole.

Q.: Government of Azerbaijan is currently working towards diversifying its economy, putting a particular accent on non-oil sector. What do Montenegrin businesses need to do to enter Azerbaijani market in post-oil period?

A.: We certainly welcome possibilities for Montenegrin companies to do business in Azerbaijan. It is important for Montenegros companies to be regularly informed about the developments in non-oil sectors of Azerbaijans economy and thus seize the opportunities for doing business when they present themselves.

Q.: What steps can be taken to attract Montenegrin tourists to Azerbaijan? What about Azerbaijani travelers? What steps can be effective in increasing the tourist flow in both directions?

A.: As Montenegro is gaining more and more popularity with tourists from all over the world, we would like to see more tourists from Azerbaijan. In 2015, the Government of Montenegro introduced a visa-free regime for citizens of Azerbaijan, who can enter and stay in Montenegro with a valid passport visa-free for up to 90 days, which is a clear message that tourists from Azerbaijan are welcome in Montenegro. And not only tourists, but also businesses, students and professionals. Having a direct flight from Baku to Montenegro is of course a key precondition. For

now, a direct charter connection Baku-Tivat-Baku once a week has been announced for the period July 5-September 13, 2018, but I hope that we will see more flights in the future. In order to attract more Azerbaijani tourists to visit Montenegro, Montenegro's Tourism Office recently had a successful promotion event in Baku with one of Azerbaijan's largest tour operators, Pasha Travel.

Q.: Along with successful economic and humanitarian interaction, there is political understanding between our countries. What is the position of Montenegro on the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

A.: Montenegro, as a NATO member and future member of the European Union, supports peaceful resolution of the conflict, and, through cooperation with partners, will continue to contribute to global security and stability. Also, Montenegro will continue to advocate constructive high-level dialogue through the activities of Minsk Group and respect for the UN resolutions and principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Q.: Should we expect any high-level visits any time soon?

A.: In the light of further strengthening of relations and overall cooperation, we expect that the visits of the Prime Minister of Montenegro H.E. Mr. Duško Marković and the President of the Parliament of Montenegro H.E. Mr. Ivan Brajović to Azerbaijan will be organized soon, as well as the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan H.E. Mr. Elmar Mammadyarov to Podgorica.

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