

Forum: The United Nations Membership Council (UNMC)

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TOPIC 1: The Membership of Puerto Rico

I. Introduction to the Topic

Puerto Rico, officially known as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, is an island located in North America in the Atlantic Ocean. While they are considered an unincorporated territory of the United States of America, Puerto Rican citizens have expressed their desire to become a sovereign state, becoming an independent social, political and cultural entity. According to Article 4 of the UN Charter, “membership in the United Nations is open to all other peace-loving states”, so independence could occur for Puerto Rico. However, almost half of the population has also expressed the wish to become a real part of the United States as the 51st state. This is due to the fact that while Puerto Rican independence would mean the official decolonization of their country, and for them to have complete economic and political freedom, it would also mean that they would lose the financial support provided to them by the US. This financial support is vital because Puerto Rico has experienced many recent crises that the country is still economically and physically recovering from, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricane Maria. Additionally, Puerto Ricans have become exceedingly frustrated with how the US imposes on them without their citizens having any inclusion in US politics. The PROMESA act, enacted in 2016 by the Obama administration, frustrated both mainland and abroad Puerto Rican citizens as it allowed non-elected officials to have complete control over the budget for their country, and has further depleted their economy. On the other side of this, a majority of Puerto Rican citizens are discontent with the corrupt leadership within their nation, leading to country-wide protests in 2019 and 2020. Overall, a majority of voting Puerto Ricans appear to be split as to whether to gain statehood or independence.

Regionally, there has been an outpouring of support for Puerto Rican independence from countries such as Nicaragua, Cuba, and Guatemala. These countries see the control of Puerto Rico as a continued colonial rule, and a breach of the UN’s promise to begin a process of global decolonization. A regional body enormously involved in Puerto Rican independence is the US itself, seeing as it is a US territory. If Puerto Rico gained independence, the US would no longer need to provide the country with funds, however, they would also lose all of their strategically placed military bases residing on the island. On the other hand, if Puerto Rico gained statehood, it would officially be a part of the United States of America and participate in all politics and elections. This would most likely mean an increase in democratic voters and would sway US

politics in a way that Republicans do not want. While a majority of voting Puerto Rican citizens have requested to become the 51st state, it is seen by many as a political threat.

A recent meeting of the UN Special Committee illustrated global support for Puerto Rican independence from countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Syria, Argentina, Papua New Guinea, and Azerbaijan. In particular, Azerbaijan stated that Puerto Rico has limited decision powers due to US control and has continuously been exploited by the United States since it was colonized. Most countries have called for Puerto Rico to have the right to control its economic affairs and escape its constant reliance on the United States. Delegates representing the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States also have expressed their support for Puerto Rican independence and the decolonization of the territory.

II. Definition of Key Terms & Concepts

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Definition of Key Terms

Self-Determination: The process by which a country determines its own statehood and forms its own government.

Because Puerto Rico is self-determined, it has its own government and political leaders, even as a US territory. This would make it somewhat easier for Puerto Rico to adjust to becoming independent because they already somewhat run their country by themselves. However, if Puerto Rico became a state, it would lose the right to self-determination and vote in the US elections.

Decolonization: The action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent. Additionally, decolonization means the process of freeing an institution, a sphere of activity, etc. from the cultural or social effects of colonization.

Puerto Rico was first colonized in 1508 by Spain and then was colonized again by the US in 1898. Because of this, they have one of the longest histories of colonization in the world, which still affects the territory to this day. Decolonizing Puerto Rico would mean removing all effects and influences that colonizers might have had or still have on the country. Becoming

independent from the US would have this effect because it would mean that Puerto Rico could begin to move forward as a country without the influence or imposition of its colonizers.

Unincorporated Territory: A United States insular area in which the United States Congress has determined that only selected parts of the Constitution apply.

Puerto Rico has become increasingly unhappy with its position as an unincorporated territory of the US over recent years. This is due to the fact that the US can still enact bills and other governmental policies in their country without them having any say in the matter. They cannot vote in US elections but can still be affected by them. They are also not currently protected by the constitution. If they became independent, the US would not be able to do any of this without Puerto Rico's explicit permission.

Sovereignty: The authority of a state to govern itself or another state, or a self-governing state.

Puerto Rico is not a sovereign state because territories cannot be sovereign. This is due to the fact that the US Congress has complete authority over Puerto Rico and does not need to ask the country for its permission to do anything. While Puerto Rico does have its own government, that government is still controlled by the US Congress.

Commonwealth: A political unit having local autonomy but voluntarily united with the U.S.

Puerto Rico is a self-governing commonwealth of the US. While they are voluntarily united with the US, they also do not have much choice on how to proceed due to their economic situation. Puerto Rican independence would mean they would not be a commonwealth anymore, however, by losing that title, they would also lose the funds provided by the US.

III. Key Stakeholders

New Progressive Party: The Puerto Rican New Progressive Party is a political group that advocates for Puerto Rican statehood. They are one of the most powerful political groups in the country holding about 39% of the population. They also hold the seat of both the governor and the resident commissioner. It was founded in 1967 by Luis A. Ferré, who also happens to be a former Puerto Rican governor. In the 1990s, an anti-crime campaign known as "Mano dura contra el crimen" ("Strong hand against crime") was launched, in which the Puerto Rico National Guard was used to assist the Island police force. There were also a number of infrastructure

projects which included a metro rail system and a convention center. There were additional policies fighting for the privatization of public entities and free health care. Since then, they have won most of the elections for governor, however, they have also not made a lot of big changes. They seem to mostly be advocating for statehood.

Puerto Rican Independence Party: The Puerto Rican independence party is a smaller political group, but still holds some power. It was founded in 1947 by Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, after separating from the Popular Democratic party to focus more on their ultimate goal of independence. A notable movement they have held appears to have been a protest against the US Navy in Culebra in the 1970s. Recently, they spoke before the UN Special Committee on Decolonization and published a draft that facilitates the right of Puerto Rican citizens to independence. This is a major step towards what the PIP is trying to achieve, and they hope to continue this until Puerto Rico is independent.

Popular Democratic Party: The Popular Democratic Party is a political party in Puerto Rico that advocates for the citizens to remain a US territory and stay with their current governmental system. It is one of the most powerful political parties in Puerto Rico today and holds the mayoral vote. Founded in 1938, after leaving the socialist movement, the PDP has introduced multiple bills attempting to restrain the rights of Puerto Rican activists and those who wish for independence. Other than that, they have not had a lot of movements, and have not been extremely active recently.

IV. Key Issues including Background Information

The economy of Puerto Rico: Puerto Rico's economy has been struggling since the 1990s, however, after hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Fiona, it only seemed to plummet. The per capita income of the island is estimated to have fallen by about 12% between 2004 and 2020, which also means that they are in a lot of debt. Because of this, it would be difficult for them to become independent because they would need financial aid from many countries, which would only lead to more debt.

US Politics: Puerto Rico becoming the 51st state is almost out of the question even though a majority of the territory's voters wish to join the U.S. and gain statehood. This is due to the fact

that the U.S. political system is extremely divided on the issue between the democrats and republicans. The democrats wish to incorporate Puerto Rico and welcome it as a state, however, the republicans fear that if that happens all Puerto Ricans will vote democratic and sway the votes in elections to the democratic side.

Puerto Rican Statehood: While some Puerto Ricans, and a lot of the global population wish to see the territory become independent, it appears that a majority of its voting citizens would rather be a state. However, the U.S. seems to be barring them from this wish at every turn. Because of this, Puerto Rican independence will be hindered even further.

Puerto Rican Citizens Not Voting: While Puerto Rican citizens have voted on the subject of statehood before, the most recent 2017 vote had a result where 52% of citizens voted yes, and 48% said no. This looks like a majority, however, only 23% of Puerto Ricans voted on the matter. This has resulted in a dismissal of these results due to the fact that a vast majority of citizens did not vote, and has also led to doubt in more recent votes on independence.

V. Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

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1508	The first European settlement is founded in Puerto Rico by Ponce de León. Spanish colonization officially begins.
1898	The U.S. troops invaded Puerto Rico, hoping to take it from the Spanish during the Spanish-American War. It is officially ceded to the U.S. under the Treaty of Paris.
March 2, 1917	The Jones Act is passed. This law gave Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship.

July 25, 1952	Puerto Rico's commonwealth status is implemented.
1972	The United Nations Decolonization Committee declares Puerto Rico a colony of the U.S. and demands that they receive self-determination.
June 30, 2016	Congress passes the Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which appoints a body of U.S. economic officials to manage Puerto Rico's public debt.
September, 2017	Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, destroying the territory and wreaking havoc on the already struggling economy.
June 20, 2022	The UN Special Committee on Decolonization approves a resolution calling upon the U.S. to promote the process for Puerto Rico's self-determination and eventual independence.

VI. Possible Challenges & Solutions

The Economy of Puerto Rico: It is difficult to find solutions for the Puerto Rican economy, however, the main idea is for the territory to join the U.S. as the 51st state. This would lead to them gaining some economic support from the U.S. Another idea is for the territory to become independent and accept support and funds from organizations like the UN, however, this would lead to more debt for Puerto Rico.

US Politics: A solution to this would be for Puerto Rico to not become a state, and instead become independent. Another solution could be for U.S. republicans to gain votes from Puerto Ricans and allow them statehood as long as they choose to vote for a republican representative.

Puerto Rican Statehood: Puerto Rican statehood would hinder the territory's independence, and so a solution to this would be to propose solid economic aid to Puerto Rico if it became a country. Another solution would be to show Puerto Ricans all the benefits of becoming independent or to further demonize the U.S. so the citizens do not want to be a part of the country.

Puerto Rican Citizens Not Voting: Because Puerto Ricans have lost trust in their government and therefore voting, a solution might be to aid them in gaining that trust back. Another solution would be to provide a reward for the citizens who voted.

VII. Recommendations for Resolution Writing including Research

Delegates who are allied with the U.S. should most likely advocate for Puerto Rican statehood over independence. Even though the politics of the country seem to be divided, the general consensus of U.S. citizens seems to be statehood. Countries escaping colonization or South American and Caribbean countries, however, should most likely take the side of Puerto Rican independence due to the fact that they have allied with this side in the past. This also includes countries allied with South American Caribbean countries. This is an extremely divided issue even amongst Puerto Rican citizens, and so delegates should remember that there are many perspectives to this debate.

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IX: Additional Resources

