



A Balkan Divorce that Works?

Montenegro's Hopeful First Year

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Among old Balkan hands, it is said tongue-in-cheek that the surest way to start a war in former Yugoslavia is to hold a referendum on independence. Indeed, in Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia, armed conflict did follow popular votes and declarations of statehood in the early 1990s. But Montenegro, a mountainous republic of just 630,000 in the western Balkans, was and remains different, for a variety of reasons. One year after its declaration of independence, it boasts stability and macroeconomic growth. Yet the question of exactly what kind of democracy Montenegro will be still looms large. The newly independent country is in the process of making critical choices with implications that will impact its political culture for decades to come.

It was not that potential for conflict of some kind didn't exist during and after the May 21, 2006, referendum. In the plebiscite, just over the required 55 percent of Montenegrin voters chose to split with neighbor Serbia and the common state that bound them together, the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. A solid chunk of the populace, most of whom identified themselves as ethnic Serbs, voted against independence and indeed passionately opposed it.¹ Likewise, Montenegro's much larger and immensely more powerful neighbor, Serbia, was against the union's dissolution. And, not so long before that, both the European Union and the United States were reluctant to have Montenegro go its own way, fearing that it would cause further fracturing and discord in the region.² Also, since the

plebiscite passed by only the slimmest of margins—55.40 percent of the vote, a difference of only 2,095 ballots—many anti-independence voters believed that the pro-statehood government resorted to unfair tactics to get the necessary votes, a not altogether far-fetched suspicion considering the actors and the stakes.³

Yet the vote passed peacefully for the diminutive country on the Adriatic Sea, as did the first year of independence. There are no signs of violence or instability in sight—which is not to say that conflicts within society are absent or innocuous. The nature of the state is still the source of heated debate in Montenegro. And, although formally Montenegro has taken all the right steps, much still needs to be done to deepen and broaden its democracy.

Why the Stability?

The current stability owes much to the changed conditions and regional actors since the 1990s, as well as to the specific characteristics of Montenegro itself. For one, the country's largest ethnic groups, the Serbs and the Montenegrins, are closely linked by religion (Eastern Orthodox), language (Serbian), culture, and history.⁴ There is no majority people (Montenegrins 43 percent, Serbs 32 percent, Bosniaks 7 percent, Albanians 6 percent, Muslims 5 percent, Croats 1 percent) and the ethnic Serb leadership, though nationalist, was not in a position to rally its people to go to war with Montenegrins, even if it had wanted to. This was never an option for the Montenegrin Serbs,

despite their adamant support for co-rule with Serbia and identification with Serbia's expansionist policies of the previous decade. Secondly, although Serbia reacted coolly to the vote, it did not respond with the kind of propaganda and nationalist policies that ignited the wars of the 1990s. It might have responded more aggressively, as illustrated by Belgrade's reaction to the Ahtisaari plan for Kosovo, which proposed a kind of phased independence under international trusteeship. (The fact that it didn't—and thus allowed the transition in Montenegro to happen smoothly—reveals just how essential the Belgrade leadership's part is in fueling tensions in Serbia and Kosovo over Kosovo's final status.)

Thirdly, despite the closeness of the vote, independence obviously had the backing of a clear majority of Montenegrins and the ethnic minorities, such as the Albanians and the Bosniaks. The minorities were promised that Montenegro would remain a civic, not a nationally defined, state in which they would be citizens with full equal rights as well as specific minority rights. Lastly, the referendum itself was considered the legitimate democratic means to settle a question that had wracked Montenegro for 15 years.⁵ And, despite irregularities, the referendum result had the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the EU's stamp of approval as free and fair. The state was immediately recognized around the world, including by neighbors Croatia, Albania, and Serbia. It was followed by new elections that returned the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and the Montenegrin Social Democrats (SDP) to power.

One year after the independence vote, the new state has considerable achievements to its credit, which have solidified its legitimacy and even won over a portion of its original skeptics. Independent analysts say that were the referendum held today, more—maybe 10 percent more—Montenegrin voters would cast their ballots for independence than had in 2006. Montenegro has

also been readily accepted into the Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO's Partnership for Peace and most recently the Council of Europe. The government boasts a very close relationship with the European Union, which has overseen judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and the drafting of a constitution, and has granted the country 32 million euros this year in CARDS pre-accession funds. The government in Podgorica will sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement later this year, thus catapulting it past Serbia in the integration process. Moreover, worst case scenarios of stormy relations with Serbia, Montenegro's most important neighbor, and negative fallout from the break up proved groundless. And, the predictions that little Montenegro couldn't make it on its own didn't bear out either. In fact, with the divisive statehood question out of the way, the country implemented overdue political and economic reforms. More than anything, most Montenegrins say they are enormously relieved to finally be divorced from neighboring Serbia and its persistent political troubles.

One major factor in the growing popular confidence in the state is the impressive economic figures it chalked up over the course of 2006 and early 2007. According to finance ministry statistics, gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 6.5 percent and public debt sank. An ambitious privatization program gathered speed, one factor in fueling a red-hot property market—sales in 2006 quadrupled 2004 figures, totaling 750 million euros.⁶ There has been a corresponding sharp rise in government revenue from property taxes, from 3.84 million euros in 2004 and 5.14 million in 2005 to 14.64 million in 2006. The tourism sector too seems to have benefited from the amenable divorce: in 2006, Montenegro received 1 million visitors, up 17 percent.⁷

The Identity Conundrum

Even though the legitimacy of the state is widely accepted, there has been acrimonious

debate over the definition of the republic. This has happened, for the most part, during the ongoing drafting of the new constitution. Although the process has been guided by the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional matters, such issues as official language, description of the citizenry, religion, and minority rights have exposed the rifts that still divide Montenegro. Importantly, these controversies take place within the context of a broad political and social consensus that Montenegro is a civic and not a nationally defined state. In other words, it is a state composed of all of its equal citizens, not one defined by a dominant national majority and lesser ethnic minorities. Eventually, the constitution will most probably refer to Montenegro as a state composed of "the Montenegrin people and other indigenous peoples and citizens in the free state of Montenegro," not mentioning any other national group by name, although there was much wrangling over the description of the polity.⁸

The primary discontents in Montenegro remain those ethnic Serbs represented by the nationalist Serbian List, a loose coalition that includes the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the sister party of the extremist SRS in Serbia proper. Despite their many affinities, the Montenegrin Serbs distinguish themselves from Montenegrins chiefly by their much closer identification with Serbia proper and Serbdom in general. Although there is historical precedent for separate identities, in reality the line between the two is fine, fluid, and even sometimes cuts through nuclear families. Nevertheless, many Montenegrin Serbs (but, importantly, not all) object to the distance that pro-independence Montenegrins, including the government, are putting between the country and Serbia.

The primary battleground is in the sphere of culture—language, religion, and national symbols. The Montenegrin Serbs of the Serbian List, for example, demand that

state's official language be neither "Montenegrin" nor the compromise "Montenegrin-Serbian" but rather "Serbian." In fact, the languages spoken in Montenegro and in Serbia proper are nearly identical, with local variations. The Serbian List also insists that the Serbian Orthodox Church be mentioned explicitly in the constitution and that national symbols, like the state flag, be more similar to Serbia's. As peripheral as these issues may seem, parliamentarians of the Serbian List say they will vote against a constitution that does not adequately incorporate its perceived needs.

The very real possibility exists that the Serbian List MPs vote against the constitution could, if they were joined by other parties, prevent it from receiving the two-thirds majority in parliament that it requires to pass. Should this happen, another referendum would be held, putting the constitution to popular vote. Although it would surely gain the simple majority required to pass, such a plebiscite would reopen wounds and drive a further wedge between Montenegro's Serbs and its other peoples. This is not something Montenegro's leadership or mainstream parties want to happen.

Another issue that troubles the Montenegrin Serb politicians is minority rights, and here they are joined by the country's smaller ethnic groups. As a civic state without an ethnic majority, Montenegro doesn't, technically, have ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, the country's smaller peoples, like the Albanians and the Bosniaks, often refer to themselves as minorities and, in the run-up to the referendum, were promised a number (either one or two) guaranteed seats in the 81-person parliament. This law, however, has since been struck down by the constitutional court, provoking an outcry from some of the minority ethnic parties.⁹ Further complicating matters, the Serbian List wants Montenegrin Serbs to have minority status and for a quota system to be installed in order to give Serbs and other minorities a

fixed percentage of positions in the civil service and other public bodies. While the leadership of the Serbian List claims that Serbs are discriminated against,¹⁰ the government, other parties, and civil society groups dispute the charge. The last thing Montenegro wants, they say, is a system like those in Bosnia or Belgium. This conflict's resolution will determine whether a full-blown civic state is possible at all in the Balkans.

Coming to Terms with the Past

An issue just as thorny—with equally far-reaching implications—is the way in which the country and its political elite address the roles they played in the bloody conflicts of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. *Rat za mir* or “war for peace” was the cynical name that Montenegrin politicians gave to the Yugoslav army's 1991 campaign against southern Croatia, launched from Montenegro. In fall 1991, Yugoslav Army (JNA) forces led by Montenegrins and joined by Montenegrin reservists sacked dozens of villages in southern-most Dalmatia and shelled the historic port Dubrovnik, causing millions of euros in damage and hundreds of civilian deaths. Montenegro remained allied with Serbia through the duration of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. Only in 2000 did the Montenegrin administration express regret for its part in the atrocities, claiming that it had been misled. The 1991 war and Montenegro's involvement in other conflicts throughout the 1990s remain a stain on its image, one that Podgorica is trying hard to erase.

Formally, the Montenegrin leadership has taken all the required steps to right the wrongs that were committed during the early 1990s. Unlike Serbia, it has cooperated fully with the International Criminal Tribunal on Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague. In 2004–05 two former Montenegrin officers, Admiral Miodrag Jokic and General Pavle Sturgar, were found guilty of war crimes and each sentenced to eight years imprisonment. The Montenegrin government has

publicly apologized to Croatia and has even offered to pay reparations. In a sign of reconciliation, the Croatian government has said it is willing to abandon most of its demands for financial compensation.

Yet, according to filmmaker and opposition politician Koca Pavlovic, these formal steps have not addressed the fundamental issues of responsibility for the war and the atrocities, issues that go to heart of Montenegro's evolving identity. “Now everything is fine and wonderful between Zagreb and Podgorica but things between the people of Herceg Novi and Niksic [Montenegrin cities near Croatia's border] and Dubrovnik aren't fine. A real process of reconciliation hasn't even started. The politicians are just saying that it's happened. Our politicians, like [former prime minister Milo] Djukanovic still haven't visited Dubrovnik. They don't have the courage to walk down its streets because they can't yet.” Montenegrins admit that they are reluctant to travel to southern Croatia in cars with Montenegrin license plates. They say one can almost count on a broken window or at the least scratches on the car's paint job, particularly if one comes from northern Niksic, a region from which many of the reservists in the 1991 war hailed. Pavlovic's 2004 documentary film about the war has never appeared on state television and only this May was shown for the first time in a state-run institution, namely the Podgorica law school.

The 120-minute film is a scathing documentation of the Montenegrin assault on southern Croatia and the propaganda employed by the nationalist leadership, led at the time by Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, which was closely allied with Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. Using original footage broadcast on Montenegrin television at the time, “War for Peace” documents leading politicians and military brass claiming that Croatia had troops on its border poised to storm Montenegro.

In fact, there were only lightly armed

militia that offered the Montenegrin troops next to no resistance as they took and plundered village after village, interned innocent civilians, and shelled the tourist city of Dubrovnik. As it became clear that there was no Croatian military build-up, the state resorted to ever more absurd explanations: the guerrillas had melted away to regroup elsewhere; they escaped through secret tunnels; men posing as civilians were really “Ustashe” renegades. In several places, former Prime Minister Djukanovic is shown endorsing the military’s line and even saying he’d never play chess again (the Croatian coat-of-arms is a red-and-white checkerboard.) The film is an indictment not only of the state administration and military leadership but also of the Montenegrin media, which skillfully took part in the propaganda.

The contemporary relevance of these questions of the past are closely linked to the present government and to Djukanovic, the single figure most associated with Montenegro’s independence bid. Djukanovic’s own twist and turns since the early 1990s—from Communist wunderkind and Milosevic ally to champion of statehood, blackmarket profiteer to successful businessman—reflect those of Montenegro itself. Last year, in the immediate aftermath of the independence referendum, to great shock Djukanovic announced his resignation after 16 years in Montenegro’s leadership. (He served as prime minister in 1991–98 and 2002–06, and as president in 1998–2002.) The move remains somewhat of a mystery, although there was wide speculation that he was put under international pressure to step down; he had been too compromised by the war and blackmarket activities to be able to give the country a fresh start. Yet even without Djukanovic in office, he retains influence as chairman of the ruling party, the DPS (a reformed version of the former Communist Party). Thus, the same questions that undermined his credibility are raised against the DPS, which along with Djukanovic has been

in power uninterrupted since the early 1990s, to say nothing of the entire Communist period.

A Way Forward

In order for Montenegro to make a fresh start, shore up its legitimacy, and deepen democratic culture, it is necessary for new political parties—or at the very least, a new coalition mix—to come to power and share in governance. New elections should be held as soon as the constitution is passed and a broad-based government formed that might include non-ethnic parties such as the liberal Movement for Change, the Socialist People’s Party, or even some of the smaller ethnic parties. But dislodging the DPS will not be easy, given its unparalleled network and patronage system in the country.

The issue of the nationalist Serb List is particularly tough. On the one hand, it would be in Montenegro’s interest to have it on board in passing the constitution. But the faction is stubbornly uncompromising and often acts in the spirit of the far-right nationalist parties in Serbia. The international community’s drawn-out process of determining Kosovo’s final status could exacerbate relations with this element of society, and indeed make things for Montenegro and its neighbors increasingly uncomfortable. It would be best for Montenegro and for the international community to decide quickly and unanimously about Kosovo’s status—so that Montenegro could go along with it without appearing to be a spoiler. The leadership is prepared to recognize an independent Kosovo but fears the reaction of Serbia and its own Montenegrin Serbs if it appears that it is gratuitously stabbing Belgrade in the back, when it could be helping out along with other dissenters.

As for the questions of the past, Montenegro’s judiciary could do more to expedite the adjudication of war crimes cases in Montenegro. So far, only one Montenegrin has been convicted and sentenced by Montenegrin courts and is currently serving time

in a Montenegrin jail. Other cases have been stalled or side-tracked, one in particular against Montenegrin police officers involved in sending Bosnian refugees to Serb-run camps in Bosnia in 1993 where they met their deaths.¹¹ Also, a law proposed by the opposition Liberal Party (and opposed by the DPS) would ban all politicians involved in the events of the early 1990s from holding political office. But this bill has no chance of passing, say opposition critics, as long as Djukanovic remains involved in politics. This summer, Italian prosecutors charged Djukanovic and an array of Montenegrin and Serbian businessmen, well known in organized crime circles, with leading an illicit cigarette-smuggling operation that netted hundreds of millions of euros in profits from 1994–2002.

In general, the removal of the DPS from the country's leadership would provide Montenegro with a tremendously refreshing new start. The people in power today are the same who got rich through their posts in the 1990s. There remains a wide-spread feeling that they are helping themselves again as the Montenegrin economy picks up steam. Should it be able to make this kind of transition of power happen democratically and peacefully, little Montenegro has everything in place to defy the nay-sayers who said it couldn't make it on its own. ●

Notes

1. In a 1992 referendum on statehood in Montenegro 62 percent of the citizenry voted against independence.

2. The Union of Serbia and Montenegro was in fact an EU-inspired compromise that gave Montenegro significant autonomy within the common state. It was so much the brainchild of EU foreign affairs supremo Javier Solana that the state was dubbed "Solania.")

3. Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, "Montenegrin Police Claims Lift Lid on Political Abuse of the Force," June 16, 2007.

4. See Elizabeth Roberts, *Realm of the Black Mountain: A History of Montenegro* (Hurst & Co.: London, 2007).

5. Srdjan Darmanovic, "Montenegro: A Miracle in the Balkans?" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 2, April 2007, pp. 152–59.

6. Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, "Real Estate Boom in Montenegro Worries Opposition," February 10, 2007.

7. "Montenegro takes Gamble on Bond's Hollywood Vision of its Attractions," *Financial Times*, December 30, 2006.

8. The nationalist Serbian List, for example, wants the constitution to explicitly state that Montenegro is a country of "Montenegrins and Serbs."

9. Not all non-Montenegrin peoples belong to the ethnically defined parties. There are many Serbs and ethnic Albanians, for example, in the ruling DPS and the SDP, as well as other opposition parties. The government's deputy prime minister, Gordana Djurovic, is a Serb.

10. Andrija Mandic interview in Podgorica, May 6, 2007.

11. Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, "Films Stir Memories of Montenegro's Wartime Guilt," May 30, 2007.