



Montenegrin Voters Expected to Vote for Independence Sunday

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Citizens of Montenegro, the mountainous, sparsely populated former Yugoslav territory, will vote Sunday in a referendum on severing its remaining links with Serbia. The pro-independence camp is confident of victory.

The referendum will determine whether the state of Serbia and Montenegro continues to exist. That loose federation - replacing the rump Yugoslavia - was created three years at the strong urging of the European Union, which at the time opposed the Montenegrin government's desire to break with Serbia. Since both Serbia and Montenegro wish to join the EU, Brussels has been deeply involved in the May 21 referendum. Under its guidelines independence will be recognized only if 55 percent of the voters favor it.

Srdjan Darmanovic, director of Montenegro's Center for Democracy and Human Rights, says polls clearly point to independence.

"I think we will have a pretty clear result where independence will go beyond 55 percent," said Srdjan Darmanovic. "All polls that are conducted here indicate that the Bloc for Independent Montenegro might win about 55 percent of the votes."

Montenegro was an independent state in the 19th century. Its 650,000 inhabitants are proud of their separate identity even though their language and religion are like those of the Serbs. Serbia has promised to respect the wishes of the Montenegrin people.

Lisa McClain is the Montenegro country director of the US-based National Democratic Institute, which promotes western style democracy. She says both the pro and anti independence campaigns have been well organized. She says the result could hinge on the votes of the Montenegrins who live outside the territory.

"You have to understand there are a lot of unknowns out there, especially the issue of the Diaspora coming home," said Lisa McClain. "How many Diaspora are coming

home and of all that group that is coming home, who are they voting for. That's not included in the poll samples."

It is assumed that many of the over 200,000 Montenegrins living in Serbia will vote to preserve links with Serbia.

Of particular concern to observers is an indecisive result where more than half but less than the needed 55 percent vote for independence.

Christoph Bender in Vienna is a European Stability Initiative expert on the Balkans.

He says stability in the region would best be served by a clear vote for independence. Bender says the current association with Serbia is dysfunctional.

"The current status that we have now is very loose, a state union that can not be a solution in the longer term," said Christoph Bender. "A state like this can not become a member of the European Union."

Srdjan Darmanovic in Podgorica agrees that a decisive victory for independence will be the easiest outcome to deal with.

"The situation will be more complicated if we stay in the gray zone because legally Montenegro will not become independent, but politically a majority of the people will deny the existence of the union [with Serbia]," he said. "If it is between 50 percent and 55 percent then we should expect lengthy talks among Montenegro, Serbia and the European Union."

Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, who has long backed independence, is expected to resign if his side loses the vote.