Compromise Unlikely to Silence Row over Montenegro’s Language

18 05 2007 New proposal to call the language “Montenegrin - Serbian” may just pass parliament but will not satisfy Serb or Montenegrin nationalists.

By Bojana Stanisic in Podgorica

Montenegro’s ruling coalition and the opposition Movement for Change say they have come up with a formula to solve the years-long row over what to call the national language.

As a result, the country’s new constitution will call the official language “Montenegrin-Serbian” or a “Montenegrin, Serbian”.

The two sides believe this verbal formula will find acceptance among at least two-thirds of parliamentary deputies, which is the threshold needed to adopt the various articles of the new constitution.

To outsiders, the dispute appears bizarre, as the argument revolves around the name of the language rather than its content.

Actual differences between the language spoken by Serbs and Montenegrins are minimal, concerning little more than local variations, many believe.

But the word Serbian has become increasingly unacceptable in recent years to some Montenegrins, who believe it offends Montenegro’s sense of identity.

As a result, some opposition parties remain strongly opposed to the current compromise and will not allow the language debate to go away, whatever the new constitution says.

Montenegro’s parliament is finely balanced. Of the 81 members, 41 are members of the ruling coalition of the Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, and their junior partners, the Social Democrats, SDP.

The Movement for Changes holds another 11 seats, making a total of 52 in favour of the new compromise formula about the language.

That leaves them one vote short of the two-thirds majority they need - which Ferhat Dinosa, of the Democratic Union of Albanians, is happy to supply.

As an Albanian speaker, Dinosa has little interest in the squabble about whether the national language is called Serbian, Montenegrin or Serbian-Montenegrin. He is ready to vote for any solution “if it would be useful”, he said. “If in the grand finale my vote is required, I will probably vote for it,” he told Balkan Insight.

That does not please the opposition Liberal Party, however, which has campaigned for Montenegro independence since the early 1990s - and for a national language called Montenegrin.

Nor does the compromise satisfy an even bigger constituency among the Serbs and pro-Serbian members of the opposition, which wanted Montenegro to remain in unity with Serbia - and to speak Serbian.

The same rift is replicated in academic and linguistic circles. Scholars from the school of the Serbian language and South Slavic literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niksic are fiercely divided on the matter of the title of the official language in the new constitution.

Some scholars believe the official language can only be Montenegrin, others that it should be Serbian, while several support the compromise of Montenegrin-Serbian.

Montenegrin citizens are equally divided. Some say they speak Serbian, some Montenegrin and others say they speak Serbo-Croatian, the old name for the language in communist Yugoslavia.

The dispute over the title of the language dates back to the early years of the current decade, when the separation of Montenegro and Serbia first became a hot issue.

Under the incumbent constitution, in effect since 1992, the official language in Montenegro is Serbian, albeit with the specific ijevakica pronunciation.

The first official change occurred in 2004, when the school course previously called “Serbian Language and Literature” was renamed “Native Tongue and Literature”.


After Montenegro gained independence in 2006, the movement to establish a Montenegrin language grew in force. The first draft for the new constitution duly described the official language as Montenegrin.

However, the large Serbian and pro-Serbian opposition stood firmly against this change, making it clear an agreement on those lines was impossible.

The Movement for Changes, whose support brings the ruling coalition close to the two-thirds majority it needs in parliament to pass a new constitution, has been keen to bridge the divide.

The reformist party, which takes little interest in debates on national differences, believes Montenegrin-Serbian is a good solution, acceptable to all and offensive to none.

"This formula does not violate the rights of any group," the Movement’s spokesman, Koca Pavlovic, told Balkan Insight.

High-ranking officials of the DPS, including Montenegro’s president, Filip Vujanovic, agreed.

"I pledge [support] for the Montenegrin language," said Vujanovic recently. "But I have also concluded that two-thirds of the parliament cannot support that solution, which is why we should try and find a compromise."

A DPS deputy, Ivan Kalezic, said his party was prepared to support the solution in the interest of citizens, though the DPS doubted whether the Serbian opposition was willing to do the same. "It is obvious that the Serbian parties are not ready to compromise," claimed Kalezic.

That, indeed, looks like a fact. The main pro-Serbian parties, the Serbian List, the Democratic Serbian Party, the People's Party and the Socialist People's Party all insist the official language in Montenegro should be called Serbian alone.

They are equally firm in their stance that they won't support the current compromise on the national language, quoting the 2003 census results according to which 63.9 per cent of Montenegrin citizens said they spoke Serbian.

"We will not agree to Montenegrin-Serbian ... because it is only seemingly a compromise, which in fact is aimed at neutralising the Serbian language in Montenegro," said Budimir Aleksic, a deputy for the Serbian List.

A People’s Party deputy, Savo Djurdjevac, agreed. "We absolutely refuse any compromise," he told Balkan Insight.

On the other side of the political fence, the Liberal Party is just as adamant. "We will not agree to dualisms and compromise because it will only cause new divisions in sovereign Montenegro," a Liberal Party spokeswoman, Enisa Harovic, told Balkan Insight.

Bosniak representatives are not content with the compromise solution, either. This is because it takes no account of their demand for Bosniak to be proclaimed an official language in the constitution as well. "Without [mention of] a Bosnian language, it's a flawed solution," Purisic told Balkan Insight.

The compromise formula has also got academics at loggerheads. Professor Vojislav Nikcevic, director of the Institute for Montenegrin Language and Philology, told Balkan Insight the alternative solution was "a disaster."

"Such a solution ... has no political or scientific justification," he maintained. "The Montenegrin language has its specifics when compared to Serbian and these two languages should not be mixed."

However, other language experts supporting the Serbian language say there are no scientific or linguistic arguments for justifying the creation of what they call a new language on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

"Calling the official language in Montenegro Montenegrin implies ... renaming the content of Serbian language," said Professor Miodrag Jovanovic, of the Serbian language department in Niksic.

Professor Jovanovic said the independence of a state did not necessarily mean renaming the language spoken in it.

Rajka Glusica, professor of linguistics at the University of Montenegro, however, thinks the independence of Montenegro is a good enough reason to justify calling the official language Montenegrin, whether or not it has any identifiable characteristics.
“It is one language, and one communication system,” she said. “The Montenegrin language has its specifics, but they are small and insufficient for differentiation from the Serbian language.”

Ordinary people are split as much as the political parties and academics. “I speak Serbian and want my children to learn Serbian in schools and not some subsequently fabricated language,” Milan, from Podgorica, grumbled.

Another resident of Podgorica, who gave her name as Vanja, disagreed strongly. “Since my early childhood I have supported the idea of independence and I can’t accept any other language but Montenegrin as the official one,” she said.

Bojana Stanisic is a Balkan Insight contributor. Balkan Insight is BIRN’s online publication.

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