

MONTENEGRO: CALM BEFORE THE STORM?

Executive Summary

Just under a year ago a nervous Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic warned the world that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was preparing to trigger a new Balkan war by launching a campaign of violence against the tiny republic of Montenegro. Djukanovic was right about Milosevic's intent, but wrong about the target. In March of this year, the dictator struck against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and unleashed the barbarous Operation Horseshoe.

Now, in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict, Milosevic seems to be concentrating his fire on the opposition within Serbia, which is struggling to build sufficient momentum to mount a major challenge to the dictator's rule. At the same time Djukanovic and officials supporting them, including head of the Montenegrin police force Vukasin Maras, are warning that while violence may yet come to Montenegro, any clashes are weeks if not months away. If they are correct, this may mark an important opportunity for the international community to pre-empt another bloodletting in the Balkans.

In the first place, Western governments must be absolutely clear about the kind of support that they are prepared to offer Djukanovic in time of conflict. The reluctance of the international community to challenge the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY or Yugoslavia) may have to give way to support for an independent Montenegro if the Yugoslav dictator intervenes violently to disrupt the Montenegrin government's democratic reforms.

Secondly, the international community must take seriously Djukanovic's recent warning that Milosevic's successors may be as bad, if not worse, than the sitting dictator. Milosevic's departure from the formal trappings of political office and power does not necessarily mean that Montenegro is free from the threat of conflict. While the Yugoslav dictator's removal is a precondition for reform in Serbia and Yugoslavia, it does not guarantee that reform will even begin to take place.

Introduction

There is little doubt that ties between Serbia, the dominant state in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and junior partner Montenegro have been strained for well over a year and seemed likely to get worse before they got better. The question now is whether or not tensions will spill over into violence.

Less than a year ago, Milo Djukanovic, Montenegro's reform-minded and democratically elected president, warned that relations with Belgrade were on such a hostile footing that armed inter-republic conflict could be the result. In fact, Djukanovic seemed so convinced of the eventuality that he called publicly for the intervention and support of Western nations. Media reports stated unambiguously "that in case Belgrade decides to use force... [Podgorica] would not hesitate to seek help from the international community, including foreign military aid....[A] complete rift would ensue between the two Yugoslav federal units, while armed strife could spread throughout Montenegro."¹ But those calls and fears coincided with Milosevic's purging of two top senior officials, secret service chief Jovica Stanisic and chief of the general staff Momcilo Perisic.² The sackings signalled that the Belgrade dictatorship was bent on taking a hard line, promoting Milosevic lackeys and using force; but, as time would show, the target then was not Montenegro but Kosovo, where a vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing was intensified late March 1999.

¹ Beta, 26 November 1998.

² See ICG briefing *Milosevic: Déjà vu All Over Again?* 23 December 1998.

What Future for Serbia's Sister Republic?

In recent weeks Montenegrin officials have spoken openly about redefining the role of the tiny republic in any federation with Serbia and have floated the idea of a referendum that would not preclude the option of loosening dramatically if not breaking political ties with Belgrade.³ The latest formal plan to redesign Yugoslavia amounts to a proposal, dubbed the Platform on Redefining the Relations in the Federation, which would give Montenegro "the right to maintain its own army, foreign ministry and currency while remaining loosely linked to Serbia in a confederation called the Association of the States of Serbia and Montenegro."⁴ In case Belgrade rejects the plan, "Montenegro said it would call a referendum on full independence."⁵

All such discussion has been attacked by ultra-nationalist parties in Serbia, and chiefly by players within Milosevic's own Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Reacting to the Montenegrin demands set out in the platform, the main board of the SPS announced following a 10 August 1999 meeting that "it would conduct itself as though the Platform [proposal] didn't even exist."⁶

The ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS), led by the accused war criminal Vojislav Seselj, reportedly issued a statement denouncing any and all Montenegrin efforts aimed at constitutional and political reform: "The Serbian Radical Party (SRS) maintains that the federal government must prevent any possibility of separatism instantly, by deploying more army and police in the coastal republic and launching a media campaign against the Montenegrin authorities."⁷

Not to be outdone, Momir Bulatovic, federal prime minister and former Montenegrin president, had his Socialist People's Party (SNP) conduct a public opinion poll, which, to no one's surprise, showed that the overwhelming majority of Podgorica residents want union with Serbia.⁸ In an oblique critique of Djukanovic and his calls for political reform, Bulatovic's party pointed to an opinion poll of the capital's residents that showed support for early elections running at 66.6% as evidence of the lack of support for Djukanovic's leadership. The same poll also allegedly showed that only 28.4% of respondents favoured independence.⁹ In other survey returns, Belgrade media reported that Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), with 18.7% of respondents polled in Podgorica, lagged behind the SNP, which had the approval of 38.8% of respondents.¹⁰

Meanwhile, even some Serbian minor political leaders who do not find reform anathema emerged critical of Djukanovic, stating that his calls for reform in Montenegro could actually prove counterproductive to reform efforts within Serbia itself. Dragoljub Micunovic, head of the Democratic Center (DC), said that Montenegro's Platform on Redefining the Relations in the Federation came up "at the wrong time" and hinted the issue of a constitutional overhaul should begin in the context of a Federal Republic of Yugoslavia framework and only when the dictator Milosevic is ousted. For Montenegro to press ahead on its own and aim to secure political Change only for itself, said Micunovic, would "not be helping the Serbian opposition."¹¹

Djukanovic's Stance

³ *Nezavisne novine* (Banja Luka), 4 August 1999.

⁴ AP, 6 August 1999.

⁵ AP, 6 August 1999.

⁶ *Glas javnosti*, 12 August 1999. See also *V.I.P.*, 12 August 1999.

⁷ *V.I.P.*, (citing *Glas javnosti*), 11 August 1999.

⁸ For the full story and all the survey results, see *Vecernje novosti*, 12 August 1999.

⁹ *Vecernje novosti*, 12 August 1999. See also Montena-fax, 11 August 1999.

¹⁰ See *Politika*, 12 August 1999.

¹¹ *Danas*, 12 August 1999.

Characterising the Montenegrin leadership's position, unlike the panic and pleading underlining the remarks made by Djukanovic in November 1998, has been guarded optimism. Djukanovic is even on record with Croatian media suggesting that Belgrade might not, at least in substance, reject a redefinition of the federal arrangement.¹² Whether fuelling his disposition is the belief that Belgrade might actually wake up and welcome a looser relationship with Montenegro is debatable, but it has been hinted that Montenegro might serve as the means for reintegrating Serbia into the regional economy if not the community of nations. A modern, progressive, reformist Montenegro, the argument goes, may be the spearhead through which eventually Yugoslavia is brought back into respectable international relations. Alternatively, if Belgrade clings to its dictatorship, Djukanovic has noted the door must not be closed fully to the independence option: "Whether the FRY will accept European integration or will Belgrade refuse that initiative once again and thus open another path for Montenegro, remains to be seen in the coming months ... On the bilateral level, Podgorica and Zagreb have good relations and thus are contributing to the thaw of relations between the FRY and Croatia," Djukanovic said.¹³

Strange Bedfellows?

Oddly enough, sources with ties to Milosevic have been the ones who have recently said in unambiguous terms that talks with Podgorica dealing specifically with the question of the republic's status in the federation must not be tossed aside out of hand. Predrag Bulatovic, Vice-President of the SNP said Montenegrin overtures "must not be rejected in advance...If [Djukanovic's] Platform is an offer to come to the table and hold a dialogue between Serbia and the political [authorities] of Montenegro and, assuming it may be an offer to consolidate a best possible solution to the state of the union between Serbia and Montenegro, that is, in the interests of the people of Serbia and Montenegro, then it should not be rejected in advance."¹⁴

In what appears to be a *quid pro quo*, or at least an acknowledgement from the Montenegrin leadership that Belgrade has not yet slammed the door unceremoniously, Djukanovic has, according to the Serbian independent media, stated explicitly that Milosevic's departure from the political scene "is not a condition" for renegotiating Montenegro's status within the FRY.¹⁵ He noted in fact that Montenegro's "political problem with Serbia is older than Milosevic."¹⁶ The Montenegrin leader even suggested that Milosevic was not the worst evil, and, in what might be speculated as a broadside against Seselj's executive aspirations, observed that some who would replace the sitting dictator "don't look any differently on Serbian and Montenegrin relations than he [Milosevic] does."¹⁷

But what to make of Predrag Bulatovic? On 14 August, at a meeting of the SNP executive Momir Bulatovic roundly condemned Djukanovic's call for an overhaul of the FRY and Montenegrin-Serbian relations. However, his SNP vice-president Predrag Bulatovic reiterated his moderate stance and refused to shut the door on negotiations with Djukanovic, reawakening speculation that in fact Momir Bulatovic's pro-Milosevic wing of the SNP is about to enter a period of renewed and protracted political conflict with the SNP reformers, led by Predrag Bulatovic.¹⁸

A Thaw in Serbian-Montenegrin Relations?

¹² *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 August 1999.

¹³ Cited in *V.I.P.*, 12 August 1999. See also *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 12 August 1999.

¹⁴ *Vijesti*, 11 August 1999. See also Predrag Bulatovic's statement cited in *Dnevni informativni servis Crne Gore*, 11 August 1999.

¹⁵ *Blic*, 14 August 1999.

¹⁶ For the full text of the interview with Djukanovic see *Dani* (Sarajevo), 13 August 1999.

¹⁷ *Blic*, 14 August 1999.

¹⁸ *V.I.P.*, 16 August 1999.

In reality, this warming of relations between Serbia and Montenegro remains critically close to the freezing point. Ties are not cordial; rather, they are marked by an absence of open warfare. Where it might have looked in November 1998 that inter-republic war was inevitable and just around the corner, evidence in August 1999 suggests that if fighting should come, its arrival is not best calculated this time around with a stop watch.¹⁹ The real question now emerges whether or not outstanding political differences between the two republics will be resolved only through full-blown violence, or whether they can somehow be confined to the political realm. Relegating differences with Montenegrins to the political sphere, however, should provide no one with any grounds for optimism, as the Yugoslav dictator may simply opt for bloodshed in another theatre.

Notwithstanding, inter-republic conflict does appear to factor into most officials' equations, but some insiders are on record suggesting it isn't likely to come before autumn. Vukasin Maras, head of Montenegro's police force has said Momir Bulatovic is planning "a hot autumn" for Montenegro, and has reassured the citizens of the tiny republic that the ministry of interior is prepared to defend in case "of civil war in Montenegro."²⁰

Djukanovic himself has cautioned that the FRY dictator is far from a spent force, but has also added that Podgorica may not necessarily be in the sights this year. The Montenegrin president has observed that Milosevic "has elevated to absolute perfection the means of governing by manufacturing crises."²¹ The only open question, warns Djukanovic, is where Milosevic will turn to wage repression. "Milosevic is prepared fully to turn to the most radical and most brutal means to safeguard his authority...Thus Milosevic is ready...to manufacture yet another crisis and another bloodletting. Whether this will happen in Serbia proper where he might attempt to drown in blood the [mass] protests that are obviously drawing nearer Belgrade or whether he will opt to return to Montenegro, as in the past two years, to stir [the pot], is where the dilemma lies."²²

The Montenegrin Half of the Equation

Some Montenegrin political voices have espoused openly the independence option. They are, however, in a minority and as yet do not appear to be the pretext for Milosevic to set his sights on Montenegro as the next place of serious regional conflict. Chief among the independence advocates is the leader of the small Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSCG), Miodrag Zivkovic. He has said that Serbia and Montenegro might enjoy some degree of integration, but after each state had begun from a position of independence and sovereignty.²³ "Montenegro could achieve its independence and sovereignty only in an honest and democratic way, by a clearly defined referendum question: 'Are you for an independent Montenegro.'"²⁴ And even some supporters of Djukanovic's government have openly lent support for independence, but only as a very last resort. Predrag Drecun, vice-president of the People's Party, a junior party in the governing coalition, has observed that "the People's Party strives for common life with Serbia in federation, based on agreement between Montenegro and Serbia...[But if] Montenegro chooses independence, the People's Party will not regret that, as we have tried everything to preserve the community of Serbia and Montenegro."²⁵

The reform-minded Djukanovic has seized every opportunity to affirm his commitment to democracy and reform, but has done this with and skill and care. "I believe that Montenegro has no other option but to continue along the path upon which it has embarked, [namely] the

¹⁹ *Monitor* (Podgorica), 6 August 1999.

²⁰ Cited in *Dnevni avaz*, 16 August 1999.

²¹ *Dani*, 13 August 1999.

²² *Dani*, 13 August 1999.

²³ *Dnevni informativni servis Crne Gore* and Montena-fax, 11 August 1999.

²⁴ *Dnevni informativni servis Crne Gore*, 11 August 1999.

²⁵ *Dnevni informativni servis Crne Gore*, 11 August 1999.

development of democracy, economic [reform] and the forging of ties with Europe.”²⁶ Likely in an effort not to antagonise Belgrade, and also to underscore his intent to play the role of a key agent of regional stability, Djukanovic has not played the independence card. Instead, he has stressed that Montenegro can have a positive influence on the development of democracy in Serbia. All this, he has noted, is in the interests of the international community. “I am absolutely certain that the international community prefers an integral Yugoslavia and an integral region, but that that same [international community] will not insist that we stay in a union only to be the victims of dictatorship. It insists on unity believing that through that way the end of the dictatorship can be effected and that it can come to the democratisation of our country and the region as a whole.”²⁷

Yet in recent months, and with increasing candour, Djukanovic has commented on his limited ability to impact on the political scene in Serbia. He has said for the record: “Montenegro has no ambition to democratise Serbia and Montenegro can not democratise Serbia. Serbia must democratise through the means of its own democratic potential, and [certainly] Montenegro can help to achieve this aim...But I don’t think its possible to reproach us for not getting involved in Serbia’s domestic political scene. In that case, we’d be showing ourselves to be no different from Milosevic.”²⁸

Inside Milosevic’s Head

Meanwhile the Yugoslav dictator is revisiting classic behaviour patterns. Having just survived the NATO air campaign, Milosevic is returning to a fallow political period. As in the past, the months following a major crisis are devoted to taking stock of the domestic and regional scene so as to ascertain what conditions may be most effectively exploited and which victims might offer the least resistance to any forthcoming wave of repression.

Of late, much hope in Serbia and indeed with the international community has been placed on the democratic initiatives of the Alliance for Change (SzP). That movement, with Democratic Party (DS) leader Zoran Djindjic at the vanguard, has been front and centre organising mass rallies and protests throughout Serbia. These demonstrations have called for fundamental democratic reform and have included demands for Milosevic to step down. On 19 August 1999 a series of republic-wide demonstrations aimed to get hundreds of thousands of protesters into the streets will take place, culminating with a mass rally in Belgrade. The regime has taken note and has signalled in no uncertain terms that the pro-democracy activists may be the next to suffer the dictator’s wrath.

Serbia’s Prime Minister, Mirko Marjanovic, on 15 August dubbed the SzP “a terrorist organisation.”²⁹ He urged all citizens “who do not share the Alliance point of view” to take “precautions for their safety.”³⁰ Petar Jojic, the new federal justice minister and SRS member, wasted little time in threatening the SzP, vowing that “all available legal measures would be taken should even the slightest incident occur on 19 August.”³¹

Indeed, the regime’s attacks against the SzP have been two-pronged. In the first place, the strategy has been to portray the pro-democracy advocates as terrorists and a crippling threat to public order. Along with this characterisation comes the accusation that the SzP is a tool of foreign powers bent on unseating the duly elected governments of Serbia and the FRY. Zivorad Djordjevic, directing editor of the regime daily *Borba* and a member of the governing

²⁶ *Nezavisne novine*, 4 August 1999.

²⁷ *Nezavisne novine*, 4 August 1999.

²⁸ *Dani*, 13 August 1999.

²⁹ RTS, 15 August 1999.

³⁰ RTS and *Politika*, 15 August 1999.

³¹ *Politika*, 16 August 1999.

Yugoslav United Left (JUL)³² went on record stating that the demonstration organisers and leaders “would vie in skill and talent to [measure] their loyalty and servitude to [US President] Clinton....[The SzP] will mock publicly the victims of [NATO] aggression.”³³ Meanwhile, state television news casts have intensified the frequency with which the reformers are being described as “NATO spies,” “traitors,” and “terrorists.”³⁴ In the second place, the strategy is to portray the accused and indicted war criminals running the FRY and Serbian ship of state as the true defenders of the public good. “Thugs and hooligans were once before destroying Belgrade. We will not allow that to happen again...those who missed their opportunity to win power in elections and now wish to gain it through street riots and bloodletting [are demanding the demonstrations],” said Jojic.³⁵

If Milosevic now sees the pro-democracy advocates as the easiest and ripest targets for the next wave of repression, he, in the pattern fitting his previous crackdowns, will concentrate on them and forego harassing Djukanovic, at least in the short term.

Clues about Montenegro

Mounting evidence suggests that at least at this point time Milosevic may be concentrating on opposition within Serbia. For the time being, the opposition parties may not be coalesced into a movement able to topple the regime, making them a force Milosevic might think he can deal with. In the first place, the Alliance for Change has not evolved a working relationship with one former key critic of the regime who now continues to flirt with the idea of cooperating with the dictatorship.³⁶ This prominent outsider is Vuk Draskovic, leader of the nationalist Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), who has recently taken part in anti-Milosevic events. In addition to outstanding philosophical differences with the SzP, the clash of styles between Draskovic and Djindjic is said to be just one of a myriad of personality conflicts that seems insurmountable and threatens to weaken if not undermine opposition political efforts. Djindjic’s dislike of Draskovic is rumored to be so intense that the DS leader “is said to go green in the face whenever Draskovic’s name is mentioned.” For his part, Draskovic “is famous for saying he will not be a prisoner of the Alliance for Change.”³⁷

Meanwhile, as 19 August shapes up to be a key date in Serbian opposition history, it is unlikely to represent more than the possible beginning of a long, arduous process that may eventually culminate in Milosevic’s departure from the political scene. Observers of Serbia’s political landscape ought to recall that the mass rallies of the winter of 1996-1997 continued for several months before the regime made the concession of recognising opposition victories in municipal elections.

Finally, are the anti-Milosevic forces already experiencing setbacks? On 9 August Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Pavle, met with opposition leaders and Mladjan Dinkic, co-ordinator of the independent Group 17 economists who have mapped out a Stability Pact for Serbia. Pavle left the impression that the Church was taking the bold stance of endorsing the opposition against a sitting government. Nearly the same time he was seen with the opposition, the synod of the Orthodox Church reportedly met to discuss strategies for supporting the opposition movement working to oust Milosevic.³⁸ Even the dictatorship seemed to come to that conclusion the Church was hostile, resorting to the use of the state press to lambaste the clergy for allegedly colluding with the opposition. A day after Pavle’s

³² Mirjana Markovic, wife of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic is leader of JUL and *Borba* functions as that party’s official daily.

³³ *Borba* (commentary), 16 August 1999.

³⁴ RTS, 15 and 16 August 1999.

³⁵ *Politika*, 16 August 1999.

³⁶ Tanjug, 14 August 1999.

³⁷ Cited in *V.I.P.*, 13 August 1999.

³⁸ Reuters, 10 August 1999.

meeting, one government daily ran a commentary observing: "A *rendez-vous* between some opposition leaders and the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church is a precedent for both the Serbian Church and its people...For the first time since Christianity came to this region, God's messengers are promoting the same stance and using the same vocabulary as that part of the opposition inviting civil war, unrest, the destabilisation of the entire state and offering an amnesty for those who against our country...With their calls for overthrowing the duly elected government...the Church and its allies have sided with those who bombed our country so ruthlessly for some three months."³⁹

But it was officials in the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, specifically Archbishop Amfilohije, who quelled the belief that the Church could break from its historical role of tolerating if not supporting governing authorities. Within days of Pavle's meeting with the opposition, Amfilohije noted that the Church could "endure" Milosevic as long as the people could. He also noted that Pavle would personally not be attending the rally on 19 August, although did not rule out the possibility that other members of the clergy would be there. "We are constantly in contact with the opposition as well as with leading officials of the ruling party in order to avoid violence. The Church does not refuse to talk to the regime and remains willing to meet Mr Milosevic," said Amfilohije.⁴⁰

A Concluding Note

Back in November 1998 when Djukanovic warned that war between Serbia and Montenegro was on the horizon, the Yugoslav dictator was purging ranks, ousting Perisic and Stanisic. A similar process now appears under way. This time around, what Milosevic has done is to open the floodgates for the ultra-nationalist SRS, which has taken up key ministerial posts in the national government. On 12 August the federal cabinet was reshuffled, and five ministerial portfolios handed to the Radicals, including the justice and domestic trade ministries.⁴¹ Independent media have already noted that this is a move by the dictator to surround himself with individuals who are not likely to threaten his authority. As one source noted, the new key ministers are of such an unsavoury background they have been barred from travelling to the West.⁴²

Djukanovic was quick to react to the cabinet shuffle, saying correctly that with the Radicals in a position of influence that spells trouble for Montenegro, as their aim is the obliterating of borders between Serbia and Montenegro and creating a unitary Serb state.⁴³ Is it now only a question of time before Milosevic and his new Radical crew focus their animosity against Djukanovic?

Recommendations

By all accounts it appears that Montenegro has breathing room, at least in the short term. Montenegro's apparent reprieve, however, should not breed complacency on the part of the international community. To assume that Milosevic is on the ropes, that he is on the verge of being toppled by SzP mass rallies, would be to underestimate his capacity to launch a new conflict in Montenegro in the future. The window of opportunity to prevent a new round of violence in that republic is likely to be short-lived, indeed it may remain open only until mid-September. The international community must use the time available to plan a response should Milosevic signal his intent to focus on Montenegro.

³⁹ *Borba*, 10 August 1999.

⁴⁰ Cited in *V.I.P.*, 12 August 1999. See also *Danas*, 11 August 1999.

⁴¹ *Tanjug*, 12 August 1999.

⁴² *Blic*, 14 August 1999.

⁴³ *V.I.P.*, 16 August 1999.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Clarify what assistance Montenegro can expect from the West in the event of the use of force by Belgrade

The international community should consult with Djukanovic and explain to the Montenegrin leader in explicit terms what help will be forthcoming in case of action by Yugoslav forces. Djukanovic's recent observation that the West has a vested interest in preserving Yugoslavia's territorial integrity suggest that he is uncertain of whether and in what circumstances the West might come to his aid and what form such aid might take.

2. Do not assume that the problem of Serbian-Montenegrin relations will be resolved by Milosevic's departure from office

The international community should heed Djukanovic's warning that Milosevic's successor could be as bad or possibly worse than Milosevic himself. With the ascendancy of the Radicals in the government, speculation will grow as to the SRS's chances of rising to the presidency of Serbia or Yugoslavia, in which case violent conflict in Montenegro would become far more likely. In this context, it is vital that the West formulate a clear vision and policy with regard to Montenegro's status and the question of future independence.

3. Seek to maximise opportunities to strengthen reformist forces in Montenegro by exploiting potential cleavages in the opposition.

With Milosevic apparently diverted from Montenegro, at least for the time being, differences are becoming apparent within the Montenegrin opposition which, if skilfully exploited, could provide further opportunities to strengthen the republic's reformist forces. A split may be emerging between SNP chief Momir Bulatovic, who remains solidly opposed to the government's reform agenda, and his deputy Predrag Bulatovic, who is showing signs of tolerating, perhaps even encouraging, many of Djukanovic's proposed reforms. The international community should feel out Predrag Bulatovic and assess his potential influence.

4. Strengthen lines of communication with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro

The Serbian Orthodox Church plays a key cultural role for Serbs in Montenegro and has informed the outside world about the political limitations that the Church in Serbia itself can play. In order to gauge the pulse of social and political change in Serbia and in Montenegro, the international community should maintain and strengthen channels of communication with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.