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MONTENEGRO: DILEMMAS OF A SMALL REPUBLIC

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For the small Yugoslav republic of Montenegro, the early parliamentary elections held on 20 October 2002 were another in a series of "critical" votes since the advent of multiparty competition in 1990. As in the April 2001 voting, the pro-Western governing coalition of Milo Djukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) turned back a challenge from nationalists and supporters of a strong federal union with Serbia whose ranks included former close allies of one-time Serbian strongman (and now accused war criminal) Slobodan Milošević. If anything, the most recent elections returned a more decisive verdict, boosting the DPS-SDP from 36 to 39 seats in the 77-member parliament and allowing the coalition's two parties to form a new government on their own.

Premier Milo Djukanović, the consummate political survivor who had been Milošević's accomplice as prime minister of Montenegro (1990–96) and then his fierce opponent as president (1997–2000), emerged stronger from the most recent elections and has now sustained himself through 12 continuous years in power, during which he has sometimes cooperated with and sometimes opposed leading Western nations on the issue of Montenegro's sovereign status and place in the world.

The priorities of Montenegrin policy will thus remain largely as they were, with the new-old Djukanović government pursuing economic and political reforms with support from Western experts and donors. The reform agenda will probably become more comprehensive and will move forward at a faster pace. The government will observe the 14 March 2002

Belgrade Agreement that redefines relations with Serbia as a very loose federation replacing the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with an option for an independence referendum within three years.[1] Movement toward European integration—meaning membership in the Council of Europe and participation in the European Union's so-called program of association and stabilization—will remain a lodestar in foreign policy. The possibility of a resurgence by hard-line Serbian nationalists seems more remote than ever.

When the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) collapsed amid bloodshed in 1991, Montenegro was the only constituent republic to forgo independence and stick with Serbia. Whether or not to seek its own place among the sovereign states of the world has long been a dilemma for Montenegro. This mountainous enclave of about 700,000 people on the Adriatic coast south of Croatia is the smallest of the six republics that made up the SFRY and has close linguistic, religious, and cultural ties to Serbia. Yet before the formation of the Kingdom of the South Slavs at the end of the First World War, Montenegro had been independent for centuries, and indeed had been the only portion of the Balkan Peninsula outside the borders of the Habsburg Empire never to come under Ottoman Turkish rule.

As had happened during other critical historical moments, the breakup of Tito's Yugoslavia faced Montenegro with the "eternal dilemma" of whether to opt for pan-Serb nationalism (led at this juncture by Milošević) or independence. The new guard of Montenegrin communist-cum-nationalist officials who had come to power in 1989 with help from Milošević decided, albeit not without hesitation, to stay with Serbia. In a referendum held on 1 March 1992, after fighting had already started elsewhere in what had been Yugoslavia, 62 percent of Montenegro's voters agreed, while pro-independence advocates boycotted the vote. Montenegro's decision, and the cooperation with Serbian war policy that it involved, made Montenegro subject to UN sanctions. It was a unique case of a political elite and a population deciding to remain within a country (Milošević's new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) that at the very time of its formation had been placed under sanction by the world community.

A Tale of Two Transitions

It might be said, to borrow an idea from Guillermo O'Donnell's seminal January 1994 essay on "Delegative Democracy" in these pages, that Montenegro had a *first transition* (lasting from 1989 to 1996) during which the one-party system was abolished in favor of formal multipartism, but with authoritarianism left largely intact; and a *second transition* (begun in 1997 and still ongoing) during which *electoral democracy* came into being.

The first transition got underway in January 1989—almost ten months to the day before the fall of the Berlin Wall—when a combination of street protests in Podgorica and internal power plays by pro-Milošević forces within the League of Montenegrin Communists (LCM) forced the existing rulers out of office. Although a few of the newly elevated top Communist officials leaned toward the idea of greater political pluralism, this was at base a Serbian-engineered coup with strong nationalist overtones, and not a democratic opening, even if the new Montenegrin government did gradually begin to use the rhetoric of democratic transition for tactical purposes. At the heart of this regime was no would-be Caesar chosen by plebiscite, as in Serbia, but rather the LCM. This party would rename itself the DPS in 1991, but only after it had won its first multiparty elections (held in December 1990) under its old communist label at a time when communist parties throughout Eastern Europe were losing elections. It appears that the January 1989 turnover and the support coming in from Milošević's "populist" regime in Belgrade gave the LCM a renewed form of "revolutionary" legitimacy in the eyes of Montenegrin voters. The upshot was a system, set up by the LCM under its new "postcommunist" name, of dominant-party semi-authoritarianism, or what Larry Diamond might call a "competitive semi-democracy."

The DPS held the system together by assiduously using its complete control over state organs and resources in order to squelch critics and rivals and win elections. The usual range of methods was employed, including party domination of the state-owned media; the packing of offices with party favorites; the maintenance of slush funds; occasional intimidation of adversaries; the abuse of police authority to influence the electoral process; and manipulations of the electoral system.[2] Backed by these kinds of tactics, the DPS easily bested its dispirited opponents and retained an absolute majority of seats in the Montenegrin parliament.

Montenegro's 1989 break from single-party communist rule thus led not to democracy but to a stalled transition. To make things worse, the new dominant-party regime's ties to Milošević next door meant that Montenegro would share Serbia's involvement in the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, with all the hardship and international economic isolation thereby implied. The regime in Podgorica, however, represented a softer strain of authoritarianism than did its counterpart in Belgrade, and was eventually more easily put through a second transition, in no small part because the statehood question continued to divide and confuse the Montenegrin political elite. Although the alliance with Milošević helped the Montenegrin regime to keep its grip on power, the bargain was so costly—especially when it came to Montenegro's economy and relations with the rest of the world—that doubts about it festered.

Ironically, and much to the bafflement of both the opposition and the general public, the leadership split that precipitated the second transition came only a few months after the DPS won a resounding victory in the November 1996 parliamentary elections. In outline, the split was a familiar postcommunist feud between a president (Momir Bulatović) and a prime minister (Milo Djukanović) over which of them possessed supreme executive authority. As in similar cases, however, the institutional form of the confrontation was one thing, and its substance quite another.

The dominant-party regime of the DPS was an oligarchy. As Aristotle pointed out long ago, the characteristic weakness of such regimes is fighting among the insiders. The pattern is familiar: Power is gathered into a few hands, rivalries arise between personalities and factions over both ideas and the distribution of inherently scarce leading posts, and conflicts grow in number, duration, and intensity. The added twist in Montenegro was that President Bulatović functioned as a stand-in for his side's true protagonist, Slobodan Milošević.

In the midst of this conflict, not surprisingly, appeared the King Charles's head of Montenegrin history, the perennial dilemma associated with independent statehood. Bulatović pressed for staying with Serbia inside the Yugoslav federation, while Djukanović dismissed Milošević as an "obsolete politician" and insisted that the only Yugoslavia in which Montenegro should stay should be a *democratic* (and hence a Milošević-free) Yugoslavia. Events in Serbia sharpened the debate, moreover, for the winter of 1996–97 was a time when the Serbian opposition was mounting strong protests in Belgrade and other cities against the regime's blatant stealing of local elections.

Some analysts believe that Milošević may have welcomed or even secretly sparked the dispute (with Bulatović as his willing agent), as part of a plan to smoke out and eliminate opponents within the DPS in preparation for Milošević's assumption of the federal presidency—an office that he would find much easier to strengthen to his liking once he had Montenegrin support solidly behind him. Other analysts see a more straightforward policy dispute among pro-independence members of the Montenegrin political class and their adversaries, but whatever the reason, the split quickly became a public face-off between pro- and anti-Milošević factions within the ruling DPS.

A Whole New Game

From that moment, the political game in Montenegro changed completely, with new rules and a new balance of forces. In retrospect, we can see that the second transition was beginning, and that semi-authoritarianism and dominant-party politics were on their way out. The first act of the new political age was a formal September 1997 agreement on the "development of democratic infrastructure" between reformists within the regime (essentially Djukanović's wing of the DPS) and opposition leaders. Forged with a view toward the October presidential election in which Djukanović would be attempting to unseat Bulatović, the agreement was meant to meet both the short-term tactical goal of cementing an anti-Milošević coalition and the longer-term strategic goal of giving the opposition a guarantee that free and fair elections would be held in the future.

In a sense, therefore, the September 1997 agreement was something like a set of roundtable negotiations held seven years late. The game was then no longer a matter of the regime versus the opposition, but of regime reformists plus the opposition versus the pro-Milošević forces led by President Bulatović. Under these conditions, elections became competitive, free, and fair, and several OSCE observer missions attested.

The first major test was the October 1997 presidential election. The first round, held on October 5, was a virtual tie and led to a runoff two weeks later. Djukanović edged past Bulatović with a margin of about 5,000 votes (out of 344,000 cast), dealing Milošević his first political setback in Montenegro since 1990. A sense of the vote's symbolic import may be gleaned from the reaction of the Bulatović camp. In January 1998, just before Djukanović's inauguration, followers of the outgoing president rioted in Podgorica, attacking official buildings and battling police on the night of January 13–14.

Milošević was content to stand by during these events, probably because he calculated that he would get other opportunities to deal with Djukanović, and did not send the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) into Montenegro. At the inauguration itself, held January 15 in the historic capital city of Cetinje, the presence of ambassadors from the leading Western nations were a sign that the newly elected president would enjoy support from the world community. Since then, President Djukanović has continued to enjoy strong political, financial, and at times even security support from the United States and the European Union.[3]

Because Montenegro has a parliamentary form of government with a relatively weak presidency, the real consolidation of power by the anti-Milošević coalition had to wait until the legislative balloting of May 1998. In those races, Djukanović's coalition won an absolute majority of seats, leaving open confrontation as the only option available to Milošević in his efforts to reassert control over Montenegro. By this time, the Serbian strongman was already devoting most of his attention to his new war against the Albanian-speakers of Kosovo. Montenegro faced little more than occasional threatening actions by JNA units stationed on its soil, combined with harassment from the federal government and its new Milošević-installed premier, Momir Bulatović.

The most difficult moments that the prodemocratic and reformist government of Montenegro had to endure under Milošević came during NATO's March to June 1999 intervention against Yugoslavia due to the Kosovo crisis. For all intents and purposes, President Djukanović kept Montenegro neutral in this conflict. He had friendly meetings with leading officials of NATO countries such as Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Madeleine Albright, and Javier Solana, even while their armed forces were engaged in a bombing campaign that included tightly targeted strikes against Yugoslav military installations in Montenegro. Much more worrisome than NATO bombers was the possibility of conflict on Montenegrin soil between JNA formations controlled by Milošević and police units loyal to the Republic of Montenegro. In the event, fortunately, peace was preserved, possibly because Milošević did not deem it wise to open a second front during his conflict with NATO.

The tense period of the NATO bombing campaign also gave Montenegro a chance to display one of its true strengths—namely, its successful integration of national minorities into public life. These groups, meaning especially indigenous Montenegrin Muslims, Bosniaks (Muslims of Bosnian origin), and Albanians, enjoy a wide range of human and minority rights and harbor few if any doubts about their commitment to the Republic of Montenegro.[4] Indeed, Montenegro is the only country in the Balkans in which citizens who belong to minority groups vote more often for multiethnic parties than they do for minority-oriented parties. It is probable that such circumstances help to explain why more than 70,000 Albanian-speaking and more than 30,000 Serbo-Croatian–speaking residents of Kosovo sought shelter in Montenegro during the troubles there.

Montenegro was on the razor's edge during the NATO intervention. Strife within the republic's borders was a real possibility, yet not even the fear and tension surrounding the bombing campaign could make Montenegro alter its opposition to Milošević's designs. With the end of bombing in June 1999, Milošević lost his last chance to use force against the troublesome Montenegrin government. Instead he tried to make the federal parliament a vehicle for a sort of constitutional coup against Montenegro in July 2000,[5] but did so at the cost of a backlash that contributed to his electoral defeat and removal from office that October.

After Milošević

With Milošević's fall from power and his eventual prosecution for war crimes before a special UN tribunal at The Hague, the most serious threat to Montenegrin security was gone. Yet the "eternal" issue of statehood did not go with it. During Milošević's time in power, Montenegro had sought to defend itself in part by increasing the span of its sovereignty, taking over function after function from the federal government. One of the most far-reaching measures of this sort was the republic's decision to cancel the Yugoslav dinar and introduce the Deutschmark—and thus later, effectively, the euro—as legal tender in November 1999. Montenegro also took over taxation, foreign trade, and more until little besides civil-flight control and the nominally common military remained under the Yugoslav federal administration in Belgrade.

The coming to power of democratic forces in that capital did not make all these issues disappear. For Montenegro, the statehood question is one that long pre-dates Milošević, even if the presence of this menacing figure did apparently help to reduce public support for the Yugoslav federation while raising support for independence, as Montenegrin opinion polls taken between the mid-1990s and 2001 seem to indicate.[6] The essential question is long-term and structural: How can tiny Montenegro expect to remain an equal partner in a federation—whether democratically governed or not—with a neighbor that is 17 times its size?

After Milošević was toppled, the Djukanović government tried to solve this problem by recommending that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia dissolve itself in a Czechoslovak-style "velvet divorce," with the difference that the two new states—Montenegro and Serbia—each as an independent and internationally recognized sovereign entity, would sign an association accord somewhat similar to the arrangements that binds together the various members of the European Union or that bound together the members of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States. This proposal met with surprised disapproval in Washington and Brussels, and gained little support among its main audience in Belgrade. With this move, Montenegro began to seem more like a troublemaker than a reliable ally to the EU and the United States, both of which (and the former especially) were mainly concerned with preserving the state of affairs created by the NATO intervention and the UN Security Council's adoption on 10 June 1999 of Resolution 1244, which made Kosovo an international protectorate. In this context, Montenegrin independence came to seem to many Western policy makers like a destabilizing factor in a region that already had more than enough of them. The EU's solution was to push for a rearrangement of relations between Montenegro and Serbia on wholly new foundations, but in the setting of what would remain, for diplomatic and international purposes, one single political entity. After pressuring Montenegro in various ways,[7] the EU managed to persuade Podgorica to sign on to the Belgrade Agreement in the spring of 2002, creating the new Union of Serbia and Montenegro through the conjuncture of two semi-independent states.

The signing of the Belgrade Agreement set off a government crisis in Podgorica. The strongly pro-independence Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSCG) pulled out of the ruling coalition in protest, triggering the October 20 elections. So powerful was the LSCG's urge to punish Djukanović for the "treason" of the Belgrade Agreement that the party formed a strange-bedfellows alliance with the once–pro-Milošević federalist bloc. The voters, however, were having none of it. They dealt the LSCG a sharp setback,[8] and clearly expressed their support for the political realism embodied in the Belgrade Agreement. The electoral verdict seems to show not only that a majority of voters now firmly support pro-Western and pro-reformist policies, but also that in a country where citizens remain sharply divided over an issue as fundamental as statehood, shifts from one ruling bloc to another take place very slowly, and the pace of elite turnover can seem glacial.

Djukanović must now show real determination in taking on the task of implementing reforms based on Western standards.

Djukanović's victory has also left the pro-Serbian and pro-federal parties—most of which still bear the taint of Milošević—too discredited and outmoded to form a serious and vibrant opposition. Indeed, it could be some time before such an opposition does arise, and is not easy to predict at this time what its guiding issues might be. For now, most opposition voters give Milošević high marks, oppose cooperation with the Hague war-crimes tribunal, and value the Serbian Orthodox Church and the army above all other institutions.[9] Such an opposition could well find itself in a predicament similar to that of the Communist Party in Russia today. The Russian Communists are a cohesive organization with many seats in the Duma. But the country's political class fears the Communists as so dangerous and retrograde that non-Communist politicians will do anything and cut any deal among themselves in order to keep the Communists out of power. This fear of the Communists helps to explain why first Yeltsin and now Putin have been able to draw such broad support: Even some democrats see them as necessary bulwarks against the return of the most backward and disturbing tendency that the Russian political spectrum has to offer. Djukanović drew the support of his country's political, social, and cultural elites—including people who by no means support all or most of his policies—because he too seemed like a barrier to the rise of a coalition that reminds most Montenegrins of the worst aspects of the recent past.

Prime Minister Djukanović must now show real determination in taking on the task of implementing reforms based on Western standards. If his government does not do this, it will have failed a key test of political legitimacy. But there are grounds for thinking that the challenge will be met: After a decade of terrible trauma, Montenegro is now calm, with a stable government and—for the next three years, at least—a well-defined state framework that takes the independence issue off the front burner. Although Montenegro is still not likely to be mistaken for a secure, Western-style liberal democracy, it is definitely an electoral democracy with some of the trickiest phases of transition behind it. It is, in other words, a country in which competitive and basically fair democratic elections have become what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan would call "the only game in town," and where there is no serious prospect of an authoritarian turn. This is why political debate in Montenegro will henceforth revolve mostly around the issue of how to come as close as possible to European and generally Western standards and structures, either together with Serbia or as an independent state.

NOTES

1. This accord, signed after long negotiations mediated by the European Union, creates two factually independent states linked by the same foreign policy and weak joint organs (a parliament, a five-member council of ministers, and a high court). After three years, either or both Serbia and Montenegro can hold an independence referendum. (There is little doubt that independence currently enjoys majority support among Montenegrin voters.)

2. The proportional electoral system, which was established at the beginning of the multiparty system in Montenegro, has never been changed, but the number of electoral units was changed *before all elections,* which greatly affects the electoral system itself. Thus at the first republic-level parliamentary elections in 1990, there were 20 electoral units (as many as municipalities in Montenegro at that moment). For the following elections in December 1992, a system more favorable to the opposition was established, making all of Montenegro into a single at-large district. Prior to the 1996 elections, the ruling DPS again changed the number of electoral units, this time going to 14 districts by means of a sudden parliamentary maneuver made *without the foreknowledge or consent of the opposition*. See Veselin Pavićević, *Elections and Electoral Systems in Montenegro 1990–1996* (Podgorica: CID, 1997).

3. At the time of fighting against Milošević's regime, Montenegro was receiving direct U.S. support that was exceeded, per capita, only by U.S. aid to Israel. Montenegro also received significant economic support from the European Union.

4. Albanians in Montenegro have a guaranteed number of seats in the Parliament (4 out of 75), and a member of one of their national parties is regularly appointed minister for rights of national minorities in the republic's government.

5. In preparation for the federal presidential elections, on 6 July 2000 Milošević conducted a de facto constitutional coup in the federal parliament by acting, without the knowledge or consent of Montenegro, to change the manner of election for deputies to the upper house of parliament and to introduce direct popular election as the means of choosing the federal president. This significantly changed the character of the federal constitution and was carried out with votes from Montengrin deputies who had no authority to decide such matters.

6. In 2000 and 2001, our Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM) conducted continual quarterly opinion polls on this and other issues. A gradual but steady shift of public opinion toward the pro-independence option could clearly be observed during this period. These trends can be found in CEDEM's brochures titled *Public Opinion in Montenegro 2000* and *Public Opinion in Montenegro 2001*.

7. See Srdjan Darmanović, "Montenegro and the International Community—From Client to 'Troublemaker,'" in Milica Delević-Djilas, ed., *(Un)Even Partners—Political Conditionality in Relations with the Balkan Countries* (Belgrade: Balkan Human Rights Network, 2001), 29–42.

8. In comparison with the elections in April 2001, the Liberal Alliance lost about 8,000 votes at the October 2002 elections, which is a huge loss in small Montenegro and for a relatively small party such as LSCG. At the same elections, Djukanović's bloc increased its total by about 14,000 votes, and his main rivals from the pro-federal Coalition for Yugoslavia lost exactly as many.

9. More on this can be found in CEDEM's quarterly brochures *Public Opinion in Montenegro 2002*.