

Next stage in dismemberment of Yugoslavia: push for "independent" Montenegro

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Representatives of the ruling parties of Serbia and Montenegro met in Belgrade Wednesday, in the first official talks in more than a year between the two regimes which comprise the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The meeting was demanded by Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic to begin a drastic restructuring of the federal state, or set the stage for secession by Montenegro, the last of the republics of the former Yugoslavia still associated with Serbia.

Among the concessions sought by Djukanovic are Belgrade's agreement to Montenegrin control of Yugoslav Army units in Montenegro, as well as a separate and internationally convertible currency and other measures which will effectively separate the Montenegrin economy from that of Serbia. If Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic rejects these proposals, as is expected, Montenegrin officials have threatened to hold a referendum on secession some time in the fall.

The pressure for independence for Montenegro comes not so much from the province's population, which is overwhelmingly Serbian, as from the United States and its European NATO allies, who see separation of Montenegro from Serbia as another, and potentially fatal, blow against the Milosevic regime.

Secession of Montenegro would deprive Serbia of its sole outlet to the Adriatic Sea. The bulk of Serbia's prewar oil supplies came by tanker through Montenegro. Without the small republic—its population is only 615,000 compared to Serbia's 10 million—Serbia is landlocked, and surrounded by neighboring states which are either openly hostile (Croatia, Bosnia and Albania), members of NATO (Hungary), occupied by NATO (Kosovo and Macedonia) or candidates to join NATO (Romania and Bulgaria).

It is for precisely this reason that the United States

has sought to foment a movement for the independence of Montenegro for the last few years, at least since the election of Djukanovic in 1997 over a candidate backed by Milosevic. Washington sees Montenegro as the last link in the chain required to complete the economic blockade imposed on Belgrade during the Bosnian civil war and maintained in one form or another ever since.

Djukanovic has moved more and more openly into the role of an American puppet. He tacitly sided with NATO during the Kosovo war, although he was careful to avoid direct conflict with the 40,000 Yugoslav Army troops stationed in Montenegro. NATO warplanes carried out few air strikes within the republic, leaving it relatively undamaged compared to Serbia.

On May 26, with the bombing at its peak, the Montenegrin government called for all Yugoslav Army troops in the republic to be withdrawn or turned over to its control, a demand summarily rejected by the army commanders. But as most army reservists have been demobilized and sent home after Belgrade's surrender to the NATO bombing campaign, the total number of federal troops in Montenegro has declined to 15,000—far fewer than the enormous NATO force being built up just to the south in Kosovo.

US President Bill Clinton has invited Djukanovic to a summit of European leaders to be held July 28 in Sarajevo, to discuss reconstruction in Bosnia and elsewhere in the Balkans. Serb and Yugoslav federal officials are barred from this meeting.

The only external factor which could retard a breakaway by Montenegro is the intensifying rivalry between the United States and Germany over control of the various fragments of the former Yugoslavia. The economic platform being drafted by the Djukanovic government would create, not an independent Montenegro, but an economic colony of Germany.

According to Veselin Vukotic, an economics professor at the University of Montenegro who worked on the platform and discussed it with the British business newspaper the *Financial Times*, the plan is to establish a new currency, a convertible dinar, backed by a currency board—an entity which would be controlled by international lenders, not the Montenegrin government, to ensure currency stability. A subsidy of 400 million deutsche marks would be provided to keep the dinar at one-to-one parity with the German currency.

Other parts of the plan, the *Financial Times* said, include “accelerated privatization, deregulation, protection of private property rights, equal treatment for foreign investors, and the establishment of a foreign trade regime open to world markets.”

Prime Minister Filip Vujanovic said the economic program would be adopted by his government by the end of July and then forwarded to Belgrade for ratification. If Milosevic vetoes the plan, this will provide an additional pretext for the plebiscite on secession from Yugoslavia.

The preparation of American public opinion for the next stage in the US-sponsored dismemberment of Yugoslavia is well under way. Most significant in this regard is the article by Christopher Hedges published July 10 on the front page of the *New York Times*.

Hedges describes military preparations by Montenegrin officials for a confrontation with the Yugoslav Army. He quotes a number of violently anti-Serb statements from representatives of Montenegrin nationalism, to give the impression that the province is seething with hatred of Serbs and the desire to break with them.

What is concealed in this distortion of reality is the simple fact that Montenegrins are Serbs, speaking the same language and sharing the same cultural, religious and historical traditions. While there is undoubted popular hostility to the Milosevic regime in Montenegro, that is true in Serbia as well. It is the intervention of the imperialist powers, and especially the United States, which seeks to turn this popular anger in the direction of secession.

To say that Montenegro is not viable as an independent country is an understatement. It has about the same area as Kosovo, but only one third the population, and much less fertile land and industrial

development. The province's name—it means literally “Black Mountain”—describes it well.

In seeking to use Montenegro to cut off Serbia from access to the sea, the Clinton administration is following in well-worn historical footsteps. This was the policy pursued throughout the nineteenth century by the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Germany of Prince Bismarck. The Habsburgs were particularly fearful that independent Serbia would become a magnet for oppressed south Slav peoples, and insisted on maintaining an independent Montenegro and later erecting an independent Albania to keep Serbia landlocked, small and weak.

The example of Montenegro demonstrates the real thrust of imperialist policy in the Balkans. Far from being concerned with preventing ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity, the US and NATO have overseen a process in which the former multiethnic Yugoslavia has been converted, piece by piece, into a series of weak, ethnically homogeneous statelets, each of them completely dependent on the imperialist powers both economically and politically.



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