Montenegro split down the middle on separation

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Pro-independence forces in Montenegro won the April 22 parliamentary elections by a slender majority of two percent. The ruling coalition government, led by President Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), had hoped for a comprehensive victory that it could use as a mandate for staging a referendum on withdrawal from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Montenegro is the only other republic that remains within a loosened federation with Serbia, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The election was fought on the basis of for or against independence. The pro-independence electoral bloc led by the DPS went under the name “The Victory is Montenegro's”, whilst the pro-federation bloc, led by the main opposition party the Socialist People's Party (SNP), was called “Together for Yugoslavia”.

There was an eighty percent turn out at the polls, a record for the tiny republic with an electorate of only 500,000. Predictions of an emphatic victory by the government in the capital Podgorica proved ill founded. The pro-independence bloc garnered 42 percent of the vote with the anti-independence bloc obtaining 40 percent. This narrow majority falls well short of the two-thirds majority required within parliament to hold a referendum on changing the constitutional status of Montenegro within the FRY. The ruling coalition had been so confident of a decisive victory that a date had been pencilled in for a referendum in June or early July.

The elections were made necessary because the government lost its overall majority last December, after seven deputies of the Peoples Party (NS) withdrew from the coalition following a presentation by the DPS in a document, the “Platform for the New Relations with Serbia.” In the ensuing election, the government's former coalition partner participated in the pro-federation bloc.

The election result has weakened the government's parliamentary majority and undermined the case for separation. For this reason, it was the defeated parties that celebrated the outcome. In the West, the election result was greeted with a certain relief, because the political establishment fears that separation could destabilise the Balkan region. Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh said the results “give no clear mandate for continuing with a referendum on independence... society is divided on the issue of Montenegro's future status.” Sweden currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union (EU).

The situation in Montenegro is inextricably bound up with other unresolved questions of statehood in the former Yugoslavia. There is the ambiguous status of Kosovo, which is still recognised as part of FRY, whilst also being a protectorate of NATO. In addition there is the ongoing struggle by Albanian separatists in Macedonia and the threatened break up of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) posed by the creation of a Croatian mini-state inside BiH.

The Western powers have advised against any unilateral move towards Montenegrin separation, even though they have encouraged the economic and political prerequisites for such a development. The weakening of the Djukanovic government and the absence of a popular majority for secession shows that the “independence” movement was dependent upon external support from the outset. While sanctions were imposed on FRY as part of the NATO war against Serbia, the Montenegrin republic was cultivated as an ally against Slobodan Milosevic's regime in Belgrade. The tiny republic was second only to Israel as the main beneficiary of overseas US financial aid, and the main currency today is the German mark. It was granted quasi-sovereign status, participating at United Nations meetings and those of the Stability Pact for South East Europe.

Before Milosevic was deposed, the primary purpose for the West in supporting Montenegrin separatism was the greater leverage this gave Podgorica in Yugoslav

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domestic affairs in destabilising Belgrade. Today, however, following the installation of a more pliable government in Belgrade under FRY President Vojislav Kostunica, this reason no longer exists. Supporting separation would undermine the very forces the West had helped to bring to power last October. At the very least, if Montenegro left the FRY, Kostunica would be the president of a state that no longer existed. Djukanovic had refused to participate in the federal elections alongside his ally Zoran Djindjic of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, the coalition fronted by Kostunica, because this was viewed as weakening the case for separate Montenegrin statehood.

At worst, the centrifugal forces of nationalism and separatism unleashed by the West could provoke yet another war in the Balkans.

This would place the Western powers in a major political dilemma. At present, whilst the US and EU have warned Djukanovic against any unilateral move towards separation, and called for a retention of the FRY, albeit in a looser form, they have not threatened to withdraw support in the event that secession takes place.

With relations between the West and Montenegro's ruling coalition government become strained, the sanitised perception of the Djukanovic administration promulgated in the media is beginning to crumble. The US State Department once described him as a “shining example” of a democratic reformer. Now such newspapers as the London *Independent* run reports noting that 60 percent of Montenegro's GDP is derived from tobacco smuggling. In an April 18 report, the International Crisis Group think tank, which has been broadly sympathetic to the Djukanovic government and independence, states “war and international sanctions presented great opportunities for enrichment to well-connected individuals through a variety of semi-legal or outright criminal practices, including large-scale smuggling. Many members of the ruling elite, right up to the highest levels, as well as families and associates, benefited from such opportunities.

“For all the democratic forms, Montenegro's political life is in practice dominated by a thin oligarchy. The control of patronage remains key to political life in a poor, under-developed society, in which connection to political power is for many the means to securing even a minimal livelihood and security, let alone the enrichment that a few enjoyed.”

However, there is no indication that Djukanovic is prepared to heed the words of caution of his former Western backers. The government drafted a referendum law in February, which permits the lowest margin for ratifying separation. Independence would require just 51 percent of those voting, with a valid turn out being just 50 percent. In other words, just over 25 percent of the electorate would be required to endorse separation. The referendum would also be restricted to citizens who have been residents for two years or more. Impervious to the April 22 election result, Djukanovic stated, “We will start as soon as tomorrow on making the necessary arrangements to create a government committed to an independent, democratic and pro-European Montenegro.”

In order to form a government the DPS will be obliged to incorporate the Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSCG) and perhaps the Albanian parties. While this would boost the 36 seats won by the pro-independence coalition to 44 out of the parliament's 77 deputies—with six coming from the LSCG and two from the Albanian parties—this is still short of the two-thirds majority required to secure passage of the referendum law. Even more damaging will be the undue influence the extreme separatists of the LSCG can wield on the government. The DPS had refused to form an electoral coalition with the LSCG because it had demanded an undertaking that there would be no association with Serbia in any future set-up.

Extremists on both sides have been whipping up ethnic hostilities over the question of separation. Montenegrin separatists have supposedly traced the origins of Montenegro back to Roman times, in order to prove that they are not related to the Serbs (although they share the same language, religion and culture). The *Vijesti* newspaper carried an article by an academic on the absorption of Montenegro into Serbia in 1918, which was accompanied by a photograph purporting to show Montenegrin patriots being hanged by the Serbian authorities. It was later forced to retract this as a historical falsification.

On the opposing side, NS leader Dragon Soc stated during this month's election campaign that Muslims and Albanians should not be able to decide the fate of the FRY, but only the Orthodox (Montenegrin/Serb) population.

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