Montenegro: European Union opposes moves towards independence

Paul Mitchell
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The European Union has warned the Montenegrin government to abandon its plans for a referendum on independence from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The FRY is presently comprised of Serbia—officially including Kosovo—and the much smaller republic of Montenegro.

French President Jacques Chirac and European foreign policy chief Javier Solana visited the region in December to insist that President Milo Djukanovic abide by the official Western policy, which calls for "a democratic Montenegro within a democratic Yugoslavia". They appealed for a resumption of last October's failed talks on Montenegro's place within the FRY.

Chirac told Djukanovic not to provoke a further "process of disintegration" in the Balkan region and added, "It is my personal opinion that the European Union would not recognise an independent Montenegro". Solana warned the government in Podgorica that it could jeopardise Montenegro's "prospects for international assistance, economic development and European integration" if it forced through a referendum.

Within Montenegro, moves towards full independence have produced a constitutional crisis, with half the population for and half against separation. Less than 5,000 votes separated Djukanovic's "Victory is Montenegro" coalition from the "Together for Yugoslavia" coalition in last April's elections, which centred on the issue of independence.

Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) is now part of a minority government in which the strongly separatist Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSCG) holds the balance of power. The DPS has boycotted the federal Yugoslav parliament since September 2000, and recently adopted a new statute removing all references to Yugoslavia and Serbia. The Referendum Bill submitted to the Montenegrin parliament by the LSCG was called a "retrogressive step" by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. An earlier draft had made independence dependant upon securing a majority of all eligible voters, but the new bill reduces this to a simple majority of all those actually voting.

LSCG leader Miodrag Zivkovic said following the Chirac/Solana visit, "Neither Chirac's statement nor the European Union stance are of an imperative character and cannot tell Montenegro what to do. Nobody can order Montenegro to give up its project of independence".

The opposition pro-Yugoslav Socialist People's Party (SNP), the main partner in the "Together for Yugoslavia" coalition, has refused to sit in the Montenegro parliament for long periods. However, it holds the balance of power in the FRY parliament, where it occupies all the seats reserved for Montenegro because of the DPS boycott. SNP chairman Pedrag Bulatovic said, "those who reject the stands of the EU are at risk of causing political tension in Montenegro and leading the country to uncertainty and something that nobody wants."

The pursuit of Montenegrin independence is also undermining the forces in the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, installed after the Western powers helped to depose the government of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. It has only been one year since the United States established formal diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, after a nine-year period in which recognition was withheld. The West is relying upon its proxies in the shape of Djukanovic and the DOS leaders to carry out a "very full implementation" of the recent structural readjustment programme agreed with the International Monetary Fund, in return for canceling two-thirds of Yugoslavia's debt of $4.5 billion.

The independence dispute has widened the cracks between former DOS allies, Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica and Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic that first arose when Djindjic went behind Kostunica's back and handed over Milosevic to the Hague War Crimes Tribunal. Without Montenegro, the Yugoslav federation ceases to exist. Kostunica wants to retain his power and privileges, in what he described as a "functioning if minimal federal state." For his part, Djindjic calls for a loose Union of Serbia and Montenegro—with much less federal duplication and a reduced role for Kostunica and his Democratic Party of Serbia, which has just returned to the Serbian parliament after a long boycott.

Montenegro already acts as a de facto independent state, sharing only the army and air traffic control systems with Serbia. But the final break-up of the FRY would have serious implications for stability in the Balkans.

A major concern is the encouragement that Montenegrin independence would give to other separatist movements inside Yugoslavia. The reaction of Yugoslav army, in particular, is also a significant factor. Retiring Yugoslav army general Radovan Radinovic recently pointed out, "Apart from the territory, we would lose the status of a maritime country [Montenegro provides Serbia's only remaining sea access], which would automatically jeopardise Yugoslavia's strategic position". He then warned about calls for independence from nationalist elements in the Hungarian-

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speaking region of Vojvodina and the possible secession of Kosovo.

Radinovic also warned that areas in Montenegro supporting the FRY would be "forced to enter an independent Montenegro" adding ominously, "I do not want especially to point out what that would mean for the safety of the country, because this is quite clear."

In Kosovo, presently a UN protectorate, last November's election resulted in pro-independence ethnic Albanian parties winning the vast majority of the votes. The ethnic Serb "Return" to Yugoslavia party polled only eleven percent. Ibrahim Rugova, head of the majority Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), called for immediate independence. In response, Solana replied that it was "not remotely desirable" and Kosovo should be satisfied with the "substantial autonomy" within Yugoslavia available under UN Resolution 1244.

The crisis over Montenegrin independence is only the latest and most extreme expression of a process of disintegration in the Balkans for which the Western powers are primarily responsible. Their policy of encouraging the dismantling of the state-run economy of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, restoring the economic domination of international capital, unleashed soaring inflation and huge job losses. This sparked strikes and other mass protests by Yugoslav workers. In order to divert these class struggles, ex-Stalinist bureaucrats such as Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia cultivated nationalist sentiments, while vying for support from Western governments.

In a referendum in 1992, Montenegrins voted in favour of federation with Serbia and Kosovo. Djukanovic (himself a protégé of Milosevic) recently admitted, "I would say that no more than 10 per cent of our citizens gave preference to an independent Montenegro". Despite this lack of enthusiasm for independence, however, the West promoted Djukanovic and the Montenegrin "right to self determination" in order to isolate Milosevic.

Throughout the 1990s, Milosevic's regime found itself on the wrong side of Western-backed efforts to break up the federation—which provoked wars in Bosnia and then Kosovo. In contrast, Montenegro became a major recipient of Western financial support and is now second only to Israel as the foreign country receiving the most per capita aid from the US (rising from $26 million in 1999 to $89 in 2001). Twenty percent of Podgorica's budget relies on foreign donations.

Montenegro was allowed to participate in international meetings from which Yugoslavia was excluded; President Djukanovic has regularly participated in meetings of the Stability Pact for South East Europe. In 1999, Montenegro adopted the German mark as its currency. Along with Kosovo, Montenegro has now introduced the euro, even though not formally part of the EU. The European Central Bank and German Bundesbank have both pledged technical support during the changeover to the euro.

Whilst a narrow elite in Montenegro has enriched itself from the break-up of Yugoslavia, the mass of the population faces poverty, unemployment and the collapse of public services. The official unemployment rate is 36 percent, but unofficial reports suggest it is at least double that. The minimum wage is 80 marks ($37) a month. Many sectors of the economy are experiencing a wage freeze, and some 20,000 state employees were not paid for a year. Latest figures show the annual rise in the cost of living is 24 percent. As winter has set in, the Montenegrin electricity company warned that it could not maintain supplies, which would have to be shut off for large parts of the day.

Though the European Union opposes any further break-up of federal Yugoslavia, in Washington the September 11 terrorist attacks have become the catalyst for seeking more radical options. When asked recently about US policy towards the Balkans, the new American ambassador to London, William Farish, said, "I think all of that is under review now, particularly in light of recent developments".

When George Bush first became president, US policy was to withdraw from the Balkans and leave it to the Europeans to police. This is now under discussion, says Farish, who is a close friend of Bush. According to an article in London's *Sunday Times*, "A son of one of the five great oil families of Houston, Farish is fascinated by the 'black gold' that lies in large quantities in the countries around the Caspian Sea".

According to Farish, the Balkans are a "prominent theatre of operations and training," and form a stepping-stone to Central Asia. The position of Macedonia, which lies on the route of a projected pipeline between the Black Sea and the Adriatic, is vital. In Podgorica, there is talk of Montenegro becoming a centre for US anti-terror operations in the Balkans and Central Asia.

At a conference on the future of Montenegro last year, Janusz Bugajski, Director of the East European Project at the influential Center for Strategic and International Studies, criticised Western pressure on Montenegro to remain within the FRY. "Unfortunately short-term stability is often mistaken for lasting security and the latter simply cannot be achieved until the 'Yugoslav' dissolution is complete," Bugajski said, adding, "It serves no purpose to waste energy trying to create a fourth Yugoslavia when all three previous attempts have ended in abject failure."

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