

Montenegro: Independence vote completes dismemberment of Yugoslavia

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The fracturing of the Balkans reached a new stage with the May 21 vote supporting Montenegro's separation from Serbia. The tiny republic voted narrowly in a referendum to secede, bringing to six the number of countries formed from the former territory of Yugoslavia.

Media commentators were generally unrestrained in welcoming the final dissolution of Yugoslavia, citing the opportunities that would supposedly open up for a newly independent Montenegro. The reality, however, is one of growing poverty and instability across the Balkans.

The referendum had one question: "Do you want the Republic of Montenegro to be an independent state with full international and legal subjectivity?" After the pro- and anti-independence campaigns had failed to agree on a majority threshold, the European Union proposed a 55 percent majority as a requirement for international acceptance. The pro-independence campaign achieved the narrowest of victory margins, with 55.4 per cent voting in favour. The turnout was reported as 86 percent.

The term "independence" is highly misleading. From the very beginning, separatist politicians like Montenegro's current prime minister, Milo Djukanovic, were actively promoted by the United States and the European Union, which saw secession as a means of furthering their geopolitical interests in this strategic region.

Djukanovic, a former ally of the deposed Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, was the prime minister of Montenegro from 1991 to 1997. He was elected president in 1997. He played a critical role over the next period as the Western powers sought to dismantle the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia so as to remove any obstacles to their interests in the Balkans.

Great power influence in the tiny mountainous region, which is approximately the size of the US state of Connecticut and has a population of 630,000, was seen as a component of the blockade of Belgrade that culminated

in the air war against Serbia in 1999. Control of Montenegro deprived Serbia of its access to the Adriatic Sea. Before the war, most of Serbia's oil supplies had come by tanker and passed overland through the territory.

Having embraced Western patronage, Djukanovic's regime acquired a privileged status in the area. Although ostensibly part of the same state of Yugoslavia along with Serbia, Montenegro was granted preferential currency status and effectively brought into the Euro zone by the back door at a time when Serbia was still economically isolated. Montenegro was bankrolled by Western financial support, receiving some \$89 million in US aid in 2001. In return, the government of Djukanovic pushed forward drastic plans for privatisation and deregulation.

Djukanovic sought to use this privileged economic status to further his separatist agenda. However, the benefits were not shared by the vast majority of the country. Without an industrial base, the economy was dominated by the black market, particularly cigarette smuggling. Unemployment still stands officially at more than 30 percent, and the average monthly wage is just \$250.

Despite the push towards separatism by Djukanovic, the population remains divided over the issue. Djukanovic had hoped to use the 2001 parliamentary elections as a de facto referendum on independence, but 50 percent of the vote went to anti-independence candidates. According to the BBC, in the recent referendum Montenegrins living abroad were allowed to vote whilst those living in Serbia were barred. Given the close links between Serbs and Montenegrins (32 percent of Montenegro's population is Serbian), this must have had, and no doubt was intended to have, an important impact on the final result.

Following the removal of Milosevic and his replacement as Yugoslav head of state by the more pliable Vojislav Kostunica, Western interests took a dimmer view of Montenegrin independence. The EU particularly sought

to control Djukanovic's aspirations and cautioned against holding a referendum on independence. One reason for their caution was the implications of Montenegrin secession for countries like Spain, where Catalan and Basque nationalists looked to an independent Montenegro as a precedent for their own separatist aspirations.

In the end, however, the EU decided to work alongside Washington and push for independence for both Montenegro and Kosovo. The latter is presently a United Nations protectorate.

This was the background to Europe's decision last month to call off the latest round of talks on Serbia's integration into the EU, on the grounds that Belgrade had failed to arrest General Ratko Mladic and hand him over to the United Nations war crimes tribunal at The Hague. Mladic, a former leader of the Bosnian Serb army, is accused of genocide in relation to the massacre of some 8,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica in 1995. His arrest had been made a condition of talks on closer ties between the EU and Serbia-Montenegro, but a deadline for his handover passed at the end of April.

Serbia, along with Bosnia, is the only Balkan state not to have a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. The EU enlargement commissioner, Olli Rehn, issued a fairly naked warning to Serbia, saying that the talks would be called off until Serbia "accedes full cooperation."

The US had also warned that its 2006 aid package to the country was conditional on Mladic's appearance at The Hague. Montenegrin separatists were able to exploit this issue to campaign against being "held hostage" by Serbia.

Kostunica is anxious for integration into the European Union to succeed. During a recent trip to Germany, he urged the continuation of the SAA talks, presenting Serbia as a "factor of stability" for the EU in the western Balkans. He has, though, sought to implement integration at a moderate rate, striving to balance this with a domestic appeal to nationalist populism. The EU warned Kostunica, who was campaigning for a "no" vote in the Montenegrin referendum, against any "undue interference" with the poll.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, who is cautious about the uncontrolled fragmentation of the region, welcomed the "orderly" referendum and declared the EU would adhere to it. Rehn said that the EU would now draw up separate proposals for negotiating an SAA with Montenegro, raising the possibility that the new state could advance to EU integration faster than Serbia. Djukanovic has said that Montenegro will get a seat at the

United Nations by September. He announced immediately after the referendum that his "strategic goal" was "full integration into NATO and the European Union."

The Montenegrin separatists see their direct negotiations with the EU as a means of buoying the fragile economy, with President Filip Vujanovic saying he expected "fast economic development and an increase in living standards." The main plank of their economic programme is the expansion of the tourism industry.

This will bring little relief to the majority of the Montenegrin population. Its small economy will be entirely at the mercy of the major global corporations and the international financial organisations.

Some commentators have raised concerns that the destabilisation of the Balkans might again prove dangerous. Timothy William Waters, who worked in the prosecutor's office at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1999-2000, warned recently in the *New York Times* that an insistence on the arrest of Mladic as a precondition for investment in Serbia might backfire, writing that "The effect of the present policy is uncertain" For all the "optimistic claims" that were made about Slobodan Milosevic's arrest and trial, Waters noted, five years later "Serbia's politics still haven't advanced."

Solana was even more explicit about the possibility of the Balkans again becoming a powder keg that would ignite the rest of Europe. "Without Serbia on the way towards Brussels and the European Union," he warned, "there would not be stability in the Balkans and therefore there would not be stability in the European continent." EU diplomats also expressed reluctance to accelerate Montenegro's accession to the EU, as this might fuel a domestic opposition within Serbia.



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