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MINORITIES IN THE MONTENEGRIN
DISPUTE OVER INDEPENDENCE**

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THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF MINORITIES IN THE MONTENEGRIN DISPUTE OVER INDEPENDENCE

Florian Bieber

The possible disintegration of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Serb-Montenegrin tensions since 1997 stand out in the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia by both the lack of violence and the secondary role ethnicity plays in the dispute. While the conflict has historical roots in the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro and the incorporation of Montenegro into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after World War One, its trigger was the policy of the Milošević regime towards the junior partner in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, established in May 1992. The Montenegrin prime minister at the time and later president, Milo Djukanović, sought to position himself against the Belgrade authorities and pursued a course of greater autonomy for Montenegro, resulting in the demand for independence. Despite being triggered by the Milošević regime, the dispute did not end with the fall of Milošević on 5 October 2000. In fact, Serb-Montenegrin relations – although there no longer was a threat of armed escalation through the Yugoslav authorities – have deteriorated since the democratic changes in Serbia. Today, the conflict has taken on two distinct dimensions.

First, it is a dispute between two conflicting views of Montenegro's constitutional and political future among the citizens of Montenegro and the republic's political elite. Most opinion polls of recent years have indicated that the population of Montenegro is nearly evenly split between supporters and opponents of independence. This split has led to a polarization of the political scene in the republic, where all other political issues have been subordinated to the single issue of statehood. Second, the conflict manifested itself in the relations between the government of Montenegro and the government of Yugoslavia, which the Montenegrin authorities have not recognized to date. Relations to the Serbian government have also been dominated by the question of Montenegro's separation from Yugoslavia, but both the more pragmatic leadership of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić and the absence of the question of

legitimacy of his government, have rendered relations easier. While the latter conflict has brought about considerable institutional instability and prevented Yugoslav institutions from undergoing a process of reform after the fall of Milošević, it is the inner-Montenegrin tensions which have produced most friction on a broader level.

Several instances in recent years, with the latest occurring during the Serbian New Year's celebrations on 13/14 January 2002 in Podgorica and elsewhere in Montenegro, have pointed to the possibility of a violent confrontation between opponents and supporters of an independent Montenegro.¹ Political choice and national identity are closely intertwined in Montenegro, reflecting the complexity of Montenegrin identity.

Minorities in Montenegro (over a quarter of the population) and in the border region of Sandžak and their political representatives have not, however, been the driving forces in the inner-Montenegrin dispute.

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Montenegrins | 380,467 | 61,86 |
| Muslims | 89,614 | 14,57 |
| Serbs | 57,453 | 9,34 |
| Albanians | 40,415 | 6,57 |
| Croats | 6,244 | 1,02 |
| Others | 40,842 | 6,64 |
| Total | 615,035 | 100 |

Ethnic Communities in Montenegro, 1991²

Interethnic relations in Montenegro have been considerably better throughout the process of Yugoslavia's disintegration than in most other republics. The victory of Milo Djukanović in the internal power struggle with Momir Bulatović in 1997/98

¹ Beta, 14.1.2002.

² Numbers from the last Yugoslav census. Note that self-identification has probably changed considerably over the past decade. The number of Serbs in Montenegro is likely to be considerably higher today. Medija Centar, *Statistički Vodic. Izbori 2000-Jugoslavija* (Belgrade: Medija Centar, 2000), 12.

resulted in an improvement in majority-minority relations after the more repressive climate of the early 1990s. This shift was both programmatic and pragmatic. The narrow victory of Djukanović over Bulatović in the presidential elections in 1997 required his party to reach out to minorities to secure stable political support. On a programmatic level, Djukanović and the governments dominated by his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) have sought to build a domestic coalition for greater autonomy and eventually independence, which necessitated the inclusion of minorities. In addition, the (hesitant) reforms of the authorities effectively led to a departure from the more hostile policy towards minorities of the previous years. Parties supporting Montenegrin independence emphasize the good state of interethnic relations and seek to explain the current absence of major tensions through a history of ethnic tolerance to be found in an independent Montenegro, thus seeking to strengthen the case for secession. Parties favouring a continued union with Yugoslavia also generally recognize the relatively good state of interethnic relations, but frequently view minorities with suspicion and as possible secessionists or question their loyalty.

Despite a hostile climate towards Bošniaks/Muslims³ in Sandžak during the early 1990s, especially in the Serbian part of the region, relations never deteriorated to the degree of outright violence against minorities in Montenegro.⁴ Frequently the minorities of Montenegro, both Bošniaks/Muslims and Albanians, have been the target of either pro-Yugoslav parties in Montenegro or representatives of the former governing parties and other nationalist forces in Serbia. In one of his last speeches as Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milošević accused the Bosniak/Muslim population of Sandžak of pursuing a secessionist agenda.⁵ Occasionally, Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) members and representatives of the Party of Serbian Unity, which entered the

³ Here both the term Bošniaks and Muslim are used to describe the Serbian-speaking Slav population (Bosnian, Croatian) of Muslim religious background. As there is no consensus over self-identification, both terms are used here. On this issue see Bohdana Dimitrova, "Bosniak or Muslim? Dilemma of one Nation with two Names", *Southeast European Politics* 2 (October 2001), 94-108.

⁴ See Humanitarian Law Centre, *Spotlight on: Human Rights Violations in Times of Armed Conflict* (Belgrade 1995); Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, *Minorities in Serbia* (Belgrade 2000), 96-99.

⁵ International Crisis Group, *Yugoslavia Situation Report No. 1*, 4.10.2000. His speech is reprinted in *Beta Daily News*, 3.10.2000; *Politika*, 17-18.9.2000.

Serbian parliament in the December 2000 elections, engaged in attacks against Bošniaks/Muslims, especially against the Federal Minister for Ethnic and National Communities, Rasim Ljajić.⁶ While these statements did not pose a direct threat to interethnic relations, they served as a reminder of the political worldview of the largest opposition parties in Serbia. More important, and more dangerous, have been the attacks against minorities launched by political parties and the media in Montenegro. In fact, observers note that anti-minority rhetoric increased in the months after the fall of Milošević in Montenegro.⁷

The anti-minority statements by some pro-Yugoslav politicians were primarily motivated by the narrow gap between supporters and opponents of Montenegrin independence, or as B92 wrote in April 2001 on a survey on the question of independence: “Montenegro's future will not be decided by ethnic Montenegrins but by the republic's minority Muslim, Croat and Albanian population, according to survey results...the referendum results would depend on the polarizing of Croats, Albanians and Muslims on one side with pro-Serbia and pro-Yugoslavia Montenegrins on the other.”⁸ Therefore, representatives of the “Coalition for Yugoslavia” have repeatedly questioned the right of minorities to decide on the status of Montenegro.⁹ While no political party directly advocated disenfranchising minorities, the message carried especially during the electoral campaign in April 2001 was that any referendum won with the votes of minorities alone would not be considered legitimate.¹⁰ These statements made by representatives of the Socialist People's Party (SNP), the People's Party (NS) and the Serbian People's Party (SNS) effectively precluded the already minimal support of minorities for a continuation of Yugoslavia. In addition to the narrow gap between supporters and opponents of the

⁶ Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, *Annual Report 2000*, (Belgrade 2001), available at www.helsinki.org.yu; Humanitarian Law Center, Complaint Against SPS Official for Incitement of Ethnic Hatred, 3.7.2001, <http://www.hlc.org.yu/english/minorities/mminorities2.htm>.

⁷ Rifat Rastoder, deputy speaker of the Montenegrin parliament and a Bošniak/Muslim himself, noted pressure and hate speech against Bošniaks/Muslims during 2001. *Montena-Fax*, 13.11.2001.

⁸ *B92 Daily News Bulletin*, 16.4.2001.

⁹ Esad Kocan, “Hate Speech as an Election Message. Children of a Lesser God”, *AIM Podgorica*, 27.2.2001; ICG, “Montenegro Time to Decide: Pre-election Briefing”, 18.4.2001, 7.

¹⁰ See Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, *Albanians in Montenegro*, April 2001, www.helsinki.org.yu/hcs/HCSreport20010508.htm.

independence of Montenegro, the anti-minority rhetoric by members of the pro-Yugoslav coalition was a reflection of a nationalist worldview they sought to appeal to.¹¹

In addition to the political parties, some of the Montenegrin media have openly attacked minorities and sought to play up the threat of ethnic conflict. It is important to note that especially the dailies in Montenegro are strictly divided between papers supporting the pro-independence line of the government (*Pobjeda*, *Vijesti*) and those supporting the line of the pro-Yugoslav opposition. *Glas Crnogor(a)ca* (Voice of Montenegro/Montenegrins) emerged as the daily closest to the SNP, after the editorial team of *Dan* (Day), and mostly supported Momir Bulatović in the power struggle over the party leadership in early 2001. Both dailies have maintained a similarly critical line towards the government and engaged in hate speech towards minorities. In particular, both have repeatedly accused Albanians of planning an uprising as in Macedonia and of seeking secession from Montenegro.¹² In addition, outright hate speech against minorities has been common in both publications.¹³ One incident in August 2001 particularly highlighted the attempts of the media to polarize ethnic relations. In the Plav municipality, close to the Kosovo border, one logger was killed and one was injured in an attempt to steal the equipment and earnings from the forest workers.¹⁴ The robbers had crossed the border from Kosovo (where similar robberies had taken place) and were apparently Albanians, while the victims were Montenegrins. This circumstance was exploited by *Dan* and *Glas Crnogor(a)ca* to warn of an Albanian threat to Montenegro. In an article published shortly after the

¹¹ The SNP supported Milošević until 5 October 2000, including his policies in Kosovo. Although a change of leadership took place in early 2001, the party remains tied to a nationalist political worldview, combined with an overall reluctance towards economic and social reforms. The NS (and the SNS which split off the NS) have been opposed to Milošević, but frequently supported a nationalist line, especially during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia.

¹² In fact, the reporting of the two dailies follows similarly speculative articles published in the Belgrade media. Veseljko Koprivica, "Is Montenegro Threatened by the Albanians?", *AIM Podgorica*, 8.7.2001. After the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, a number of Belgrade tabloids and nationalist publications published articles warning of terrorist threats emanating from Albanians and Bośniaks/Muslims. See ICG, "Bin Laden and the Balkans. The Politics of Anti-Terrorism", 9.11.2001, 25-27.

¹³ Center for Democracy and Human Rights, *Transition in Montenegro (Legislation, Media, Privatization)*, No. 9 (January-March 2001), 21-22.

¹⁴ *AFP*, 25.8.2001; *DPA*, 28.8.2001. Subsequently not only the Montenegrin authorities but also the Federal Ministry of Defence noted that there was no threat of Albanian 'extremism', *DPA*, 7.9.2001.

incident, *Dan* reconstructed the events from the perspective of one of the survivors and gave ample space to comments of the inhabitants of the nearest village Velika. Their statements were left without comment, thus following a frequently used technique of disguising prejudice or a political agenda behind an alleged ‘vox populi’. The voice of the ordinary co-national gives the content more legitimacy.¹⁵ One of the emphases here was on the ethnic motivation for the crime committed: “It isn’t important that the murdered man was from Bosnia; the important thing is that the murdered man was a Serb.” Furthermore, Albanians, exclusively called ‘Šiptars’¹⁶, are seen as a collective threat to Serbs in that area: “The Šiptars on the other side of the border know everything about us. I have no idea who provides them with information.” Finally, the quotes identify the government as being responsible for not having taken the “Albanian threat” seriously: “They [the government] are constantly saying that the Šiptars will leave Montenegro alone”.¹⁷ The instrumentalization of this robbery for political gain echoed an earlier incident in March 2001 when pro-UÇK graffiti appeared in the districts of Plav and Gusinje, where similarly media and political parties cultivated the fear of an imminent Albanian rebellion.¹⁸

In contrast to other republics of the former Yugoslavia, the main potential line of conflict in Montenegro lies between populations of the same ethnicity with different political choices and not between different ethnic communities. While the analogy of the war in Macedonia in 2001 has and can be instrumentalized in this dispute, the minority-majority relations remain a function of relations across the political divide of the dominant ethnic community.

A particular danger arises from the deliberate mobilization of such fears by the media and political parties. The overall number of anti-minority incidents in Montenegro over the past years has been altogether small in comparison to most neighbouring

¹⁵ This technique was one of the key characteristics of nationalist mobilization in the Serbian media during the rise of Milošević in the late 1980s. See for example the recently published study Aljosa Mimica und Radina Vucetic, *Vreme kada je narod govorio* [The time the people talked] (Belgrade: Fond za humanitarno pravo, 2001).

¹⁶ “Šiptari” is a derogatory Serbian term for Albanians.

¹⁷ All quotes are from *Dan*, 26.8.2001.

¹⁸ See Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, *Albanians in Montenegro*, April 2001, www.helsinki.org.yu/hcs/HCSreport20010508.htm.

countries. Given the fact that the prime political divisions in Montenegro do not follow ethnic lines, there is additional reason to believe that a repetition of violent interethnic tensions, as has been the case in most countries of the region, can be avoided in Montenegro. The fundamental divide between supporters of Yugoslavia and of an independent Montenegro has, however, run the risk of also adversely affecting interethnic relations in the country. A referendum campaign, even if it were to be based on the recent EU proposals for reconstructing the relations between the two republics, will have the question of independence at its symbolical core. Any campaign for a referendum, if it is to take place, is likely to produce a volatile climate in which ethnicity can be instrumentalized by political leaders and the media to increase support for a particular outcome of the referendum. In addition, the possible uncertainty following a referendum is similarly a period where isolated incidents, be they related to ethnicity or merely linked by the ethnic background of those involved, can spark a broader downturn in ethnic relations. At the same time, the recently voiced suggestion of not having a referendum at all, but to follow the ‘Czechoslovak’ model can hardly be considered a viable option.¹⁹ In fact, a solution without a referendum might not reflect the popular will of a majority of citizens of either republic, as was the case in Czechoslovakia. Instead, a polarization and possible attacks against minorities could be avoided with greater emphasis on the process of consensus-building and by ensuring a broadly accepted referendum.²⁰

Policy Recommendations

The United States and the European Union in their attempts to mediate an end to the constitutional and political crisis of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia focused on negotiations between the Montenegro and the Serbian/Yugoslav government. There is a need, however, for increased awareness for the dispute over the final status *within* Montenegro. As Western mediation seeks to ensure stability in the region, and to

¹⁹ Montenegrin Prime Minister Filip Vujanovic made the suggestion in February 2002. *MNToday*, 17.2.2002.

²⁰ This point was also emphasized by the Serbian deputy Prime Minister Zarko Korac. He criticized the EU for advocating a particular outcome instead of securing conditions for a referendum: “[T]he international community would have to concentrate on conditions for holding a referendum and defining criteria for declaring its success instead of trying to influence Podgorica via Belgrade.” *FoNet*, 23.1.2002.

further democratization and strengthen the rule of law in both republics, the inner-Montenegrin lines of conflict require more attention. Especially interethnic relations might deteriorate during the process of clarifying the future status of Montenegro. Such a development would be a grave threat to democracy and stability in Montenegro, Serbia and the neighbouring countries, and needs to be avoided. In order to prevent such a development, the following steps should be considered:

- Ensure that the interests of minorities are taken into account during the negotiations between Montenegro and Serbia/Yugoslavia over the final status of Montenegro. This can be achieved either by including minority representatives directly or by establishing an additional consultative forum where minority representatives from both republics, especially from the Sandžak region, can formulate their concerns.
- Seek guarantees from political elites in Montenegro (and Serbia) not to instrumentalize minorities in the campaigns for a referendum or early elections. Such pressure would include breaking off contacts with politicians who openly engage in hate speech against minorities.
- Focus stronger on the process of negotiations and less on the outcome. To date, the international community's strategy has been to endorse the preservation of Yugoslavia as preferred outcome. This support for one outcome is often perceived as support for the political representatives of this option in Montenegro. As long as key members of the pro-Yugoslav coalition in Montenegro attack minorities or question their right to participate in a referendum, the position of the international community should seek to make a stronger distinction between its preferred outcome, i.e. the preservation of Yugoslavia, and the proponents of this option in Montenegro.
- Facilitate a consensus-seeking process in Montenegro in the preparation of the resolution of its final status. Both the Council of Europe and the OSCE in Montenegro have sought to provide advice and monitor legal reforms, including proposed referendum laws. Such activities should be

strengthened and international actors should thus strengthen their role on the ground.

- The media have played a negative role by publishing sensationalist reports about minority terrorist threats. The international community should both support the further professionalization of the media and back human rights and other organizations monitoring media reporting in Montenegro to detect and help prevent the dissemination of hate speech.

- The Yugoslav, Serbian and Montenegrin governments have all signalled their readiness to reform the current legal framework to better accommodate minorities. These efforts are exemplified by the proposal for a new law on minorities at the federal level. There is a danger, however, that these reforms are slowed down by the continued uncertainty of the legal status of Montenegro. Concerted efforts should be undertaken to ensure that this process of reform is not stalled and both republics initiate a new legal framework for the protection of minorities and their inclusion in the political system.