

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**New Montenegro and
Regional Stability**

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June 2006

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Key Points

- * In line with pre-referendum agreements a new independent Montenegro must be swiftly recognised and admitted to international bodies, as indicated by the EU.
- * Making pre-referendum promises is cheap in the Balkans. Realisation is much harder and the current government will be under pressure and scrutiny to deliver.
- * Montenegro is internally deeply divided no matter how one defines or divides the population, with possible but unlikely potential to cause long-term instability. However, it is unlikely to cause a major political polarisation in the short-term as the political party landscape is likely to re-shape. Balancing and calming these internal relations will be a continuing challenge for all forthcoming governments
- * While on the surface Montenegro did not suffer direct conflict and associated destruction over the past decade, other repercussions such as politicisation of the intelligence services coupled with corruption and high levels of crime are very present and will be difficult to address in the short-term.
- * Creating viable and cost-effective military-security structures will be a priority for the new Montenegrin government. Priority should be the de-politisation of the whole issue and a lessons-learned approach with international assistance where necessary. NATO's Partnership for Peace should be a straightforward issue.
- * The EU's role as a promoter of reform is critical for the whole region, Montenegro included. A delicate 'partnership' approach must be used, with clear 'conditionality' attached to it.

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Introduction

Europe, and the world, have decided to keep their word and recognise the 86% electorate turnout voting 55.5% for independence.¹ Montenegro's Đukanović led government, having proclaimed electoral victory and independence is currently in a state of limbo, until the EU and others follow suit officially.

The other critical side to the story, Belgrade, seems to be moving in the same direction, having been left with little choice but to sort itself out. Despite some constitutional obstacles (for example whether the current Union Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković should continue in that position), the transfer of Union level competencies is most likely to take place by direct transfer to the Republic level, with Ministers simply transferring portfolio.² With Belgrade having lost the fight to keep Montenegro within the Union – having done little to keep it in the first place, the Unionist forces in Montenegro have little leverage.

However, with all the squabble regarding the Union over, what remains on the ground? **Serbia remains weak in the short term**, the speed of its recovery very much dependent not only on internal but external forces, that is, on the question of the future status of Kosovo. The 'loss' of Montenegro was very much anticipated and the public was prepared, although many like to argue otherwise. It will be interesting to observe whether the same will apply for Kosovo. However, it seems that a significant proportion of Serbia's political elite has still not learned the lessons from the past decade and will not wake up to reality.

Montenegro also remains weak, *de facto* a divided society, split almost down the middle. Only a decade ago Montenegro voted to stay with Serbia and now it has decided otherwise, showing how delicate the balance is, fluctuating depending on a variety of factors. There is no doubt that Serbia's unresolved issue with the ICTY as well as lack of domestic reform persuaded many in Montenegro that a separate path was best.³

Furthermore, Montenegro is also weakened in that it has gained a substantial 'minority', the around 185,000 unionist Serbs that could – if not addressed adequately - look to strengthen their relations with Belgrade even more. Wining over such voters, by offering, for example, the right to dual nationality, will be a long and hard battle, as the whole region struggles to join a larger community of values, the EU.

National Minorities

National minorities in Montenegro played an important role in the independence referendum, acting almost as a third force.⁴ According to the 2003 census, national minorities accounted for over 25% of the population, with Montenegrins and Serbs

represented by 42% and 31% respectively. Their exact role is difficult to determine, as many blocks are clearly governed by political allegiances of dubious validity, from the desire to keep Sandzak unified by keeping the Union alive, to the desire to see a Greater Albania some time in the future.⁵

In this respect, one can even argue that defining national minorities in Montenegro is difficult and vague, as they represent almost a third of the population, albeit split into specific groups. If such minorities are excluded from the vote, as argued by many Unionist politicians, it is obvious that the majority was and still is against Montenegrin independence.

The role of this third force will be interesting to watch over the short to medium term, as they could prove to be a further destabilising factor, especially if economic problems persist and the nationalist element continues to enjoy the free ride it has had over the past decade or so. The current pro-independence lobby is keen to emphasise that there is little chance for this third force to cause problems – such as those in Macedonia - in the future, as all its members are Montenegrin above all.

However, such statements are best regarded as political ‘gaming’ rather than a real statement of fact. Looking at regional developments during the past decades, while it is extremely unlikely that any new secessionist movement will emerge in the short term, especially one originating within Montenegro, it can not completely be excluded in the medium to long term. Much will depend on Montenegro’s success at economic and social integration and development, the EU’s role in the region and also on political forces that prevail over the border, in Kosovo and Albania. For example, although the national minorities are protected within the Constitution and the Montenegrin government has increased their representation in public service, they are still under-represented (e.g. making up only 5 per cent of public servants) and the hotly debated Law on National Minorities is still not a closed book, having passed several draft versions in the last 2-3 years.⁶

Staying afloat

The Đukanović government may have found one more way of staying afloat – as many see it - but now the game will be harder to play. The focus will be on the government alone and there will be little scope to shift blame onto Belgrade or others. The government will have to realise that support for independence does not mean support for its policies, which have overall not brought about any improvement in living standards for the average voter. Many pro-independence voters saw the referendum question as one of restoring historical justice and sovereignty and not as synonymous with Đukanović and his policies.⁷

Although Đukanović is almost certain to win the next elections, the detail will be interesting, as the current political structures will have little time to implement any significant programmes or changes apart from constituting a few new government offices, admission to the UN and other international organisations and most importantly restarting negotiations with the EU. Furthermore, much effort will have to be devoted to negotiating what remains to be done to ‘separate from Serbia’ and striking workable deals. Despite vengeful rhetoric prior to the referendum – especially from Serbia – there seems to be much logic and cost-efficiency in preliminary discussions taking place (e.g. dual usage of Embassies), only reinforcing the view held by many that the whole separation issue was always just a paper battle, and would in fact change little on the ground. **Serbia and Montenegro were already separate, and do not really lose much, considering the historic friendship between the two. Temporary animosity among certain**

circles will quickly fade away, especially if the political leadership, particularly that in opposition, matures and takes responsibility.

Dukanović and those aligned to him will be using all tools available retain power, having spent over 15 years in office by simply rotating positions. Well publicised actions such as the deal with a Canadian group privatizing the military naval dockyard in Tivat in order to turn it into a marina for large yachts, or the rumoured deal with a Singapore company for the running of a tourist centre on Sveti Stefan are attempts to address criticism from people like Medojević. However, such actions can be questioned and require a thorough professional approach not coloured with political factors. There is no doubt that Montenegro has moved on from Serbia, reaching a slightly higher level of political maturity, so that such **economic issues** will be at the forefront of future political battles if logic prevails and if the current government decides to move ahead with genuine reform.

Any Real Opposition?

The position of the **Unionist camp** is still debatable. Ultimately, they will have to face their referendum defeat. That is the reality on the ground – ‘sanctioned by the EU’. Serbia’s political elite will have to deal with its own problems and the Montenegrin Unionists will be left with two choices. One the one side they (SNS, NS) may continue with what the EU and the West will increasingly see as ‘unhelpful’ tactics that serve no purpose. On the other side opposition parties might try to re-emerge as a viable opposition, fighting for issues that are of real concern in the medium to long term – social and economic revival and development. The SNP is certainly showing signs it is moving in this direction, although still rather cautiously, justifying it in line with adherence to European principles and Montenegro’s future in the EU. The result, at least in the short term, will be the splitting of the opposition into fractions, and the loss of a possible common front in the forthcoming elections, thus aiding the current government’s electoral chances.

The real player that has made headlines in the last six months is the Group for Change, with its charismatic leader Nebojša Medojević.⁸ This ‘NGO’ has certainly had effect as a political entity and is likely to move in this direction in the near future. Not questioning the issue of Montenegrin sovereignty, they have focused on what they call real issues facing Montenegro and will find many sympathisers in the West, and have had positive high-level meetings in several countries, including the US.

Political life in Montenegro will thus be interesting in the forthcoming period, although not of strategic **importance to** Western capitals now that the main issue has been overcome. It is unlikely to lead to any major polarisation of political life as the Balkan political elites are very pragmatic and always seem to find a way out – at least in the short term.

Montenegro’s Big Brother

Related to this is the **relationship between the newly independent Montenegro and Serbia**. First indications can be gleaned from the post-referendum statements made by Serbian President Boris Tadić and those by Montenegro’s President Filip Vujanović, who both agreed that the ‘special relationship’ will remain and that the

new political reality and interests will determine the exact nature of that relationship. As Tadić stated:

“I believe that the relations between Serbia and Montenegro should be the best possible relations. I think that all those political ideas talking about erecting barriers, walls, tightest possible borders, are very irresponsible and very dangerous, not only for the interests of citizens but also for both republics, both states.”⁹

Responses from the Serbian government have been rather more cautious, but more to do with saving face and political credibility than any desire to destabilize relations. For Koštunica it has been a humiliating development, as he has half-heartedly tried to back up the Unionist position. The lack of willingness to talk to Podgorica prior to the referendum will, apart from showing political immaturity, not help the situation in the short term and force a catch-up process. There are numerous issues to be discussed, from economic and property issues to debt, workers’ rights and cooperation in military-security matters.

The Serbian nationalist-radical element at first tried to question the validity of the referendum but has since then moved on.¹⁰ The Serbian call for the maintenance of the union based on historical brotherhood and common national identity (in some cases Greater Serbia) was an important referendum issue. Đukanović addressed this nationalist-radical Great Serbia argument very well in one of his pre-referendum TV duels, when he stated:

“My message is: please, do not defend Serbs in Montenegro from Montenegro itself, because we all saw how well you defended Serb interests in Croatia and Bosnia.”¹¹

In the meantime, Serbia has enough on its plate to worry about, starting with securing Serbia’s succession rights, as defined by the EU negotiated Union Charter and specifically relating to the UN Security Council resolution 1244 (99).¹² As it was always clear to many, ramifications of Montenegro’s independence will have more effect on Serbia than on Montenegro itself. Serbia will now be forced to adopt a new Constitution, having for internal political reasons prolonged it for 4-5 years, forcing new elections, something many are not keen to see, again relating to ongoing negotiations over the future status of Kosovo.

The EU concern lives on

From the outset the EU was very much against the referendum, justifying such a stance behind the scenes on the grounds of negative regional implications. Once over this idea it imposed strict, and some would say unfair, rules regarding the referendum. Its biggest achievement at that point was to get all sides, including Belgrade, to agree to its conditions. Now it seems the EU is happy that the crisis is over and that it can put the whole issue aside, continuing with business as usual.¹³ In reality, **the EU was constantly trying to find a quick fix to the whole problem**, not looking too much into the future, confident it will be able to deal with any problems when and if they come.

The main concern for the EU is the prevalence of **corruption and organised crime**, with regional and wider implications. In a way it can be argued that these were the only available mechanisms to help Montenegro to overcome the past decade of sanctions and political turmoil, no doubt to the advantage of certain elites, **sanctioned by the ‘state’**. As Đukanović recently explained to the Italian

newspaper *LA STAMPA*, when questioned about the future of relations with Italy and an Italian legal inquiry into regional smuggling:

“...I am convinced that this is due to the absence of a clear vision of those events, and not just those. This image was forged by Belgrade in the last decade, because it has always enjoyed very close ties with Italy, and it tried in every possible way to discredit our state policy...I repeat, what we did back then was perfectly legal and it was dictated by the need to survive; if we were at all at fault, then it was due to our complete inability to communicate with our neighbours. Luckily, as soon as circumstances changed, we set in motion full and complete cooperation with neighbouring countries.”¹⁴

The declared state policy orientation towards Euro-Atlantic integration will ultimately dictate reforms in this area. Looking at recent experiences from Romania and Bulgaria, simply enacting legislation as a means to appease the West will not be sufficient, especially as the latter will be monitoring this area with particular interest. Listening to Đukanović one can rest assured that this point is well understood:

“...we also have specific strategic objectives such as membership of NATO and membership of the European Union; and when I talk about strategic objectives, I refer to them also in a symbolic sense because being a member of those organizations means that we will have achieved high economic and civic standards.”¹⁵

However, even if Đukanović is sincere in his endeavours, there still remains his ability to implement them, which will not be easy, as sadly experienced by the late Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. The fact that a large percentage of this illicit trade goes through Montenegro and that a considerable percentage of the otherwise unemployed population makes a living from it, makes the task difficult, to say the least. The government will thus be faced with a delicate decision on how best to balance the two issues, whether it stands open to admitting the problem or not

Military-Security Aspects

Since **the military** was a Union level responsibility and the Đukanović-led government has made NATO membership a priority objective, the question of how Montenegro will approach this issue is of interest to many. Before looking at the specifics, it is important to note that Montenegro is not able to finance any significant force structure in a real military sense. The total estimated budgetary outlay is not likely to exceed 50 million Euro, i.e. below the 2% of GDP set as a guideline by NATO.¹⁶ Secondly, priority will have to be given to economic development and in this process the military-security structures (with an emphasis on police-type activity) will have only an indirect effect – by providing a stable and secure working environment that will attract inward investment and provide a healthy business environment. Thirdly, thinking will have to be determined by the country’s future foreign and domestic policy as the primary guide. All analysis to date seems to start the wrong way round, from debating the number of troops and then finding possible roles for them.

Montenegro will on paper inherit significant military capacity for its size and needs. However, in real terms the vast majority of it is outdated and needs to be withdrawn

from service. Most of the navy's ships and submarines date back to the 1960-1980 period and in terms of combat effectiveness are outdated and simply a financial burden. One or two medium patrol vessels coupled with a number of fast patrol boats is all that is likely to be necessary, and the biggest challenge will be how to rid the country of this burden in the least costly way, possibly selling the majority for scrap. Other services face a similar fate, especially heavy armaments and fighter jets.

Considering all these points, it will be difficult for the current government to decide on any long-term plan. However, ultimately one will be necessary, in the form of a strategic document. On a positive note, bilateral and NATO advice will be forthcoming, as well as lessons learned from the neighbourhood, so Montenegro will not have to 'invent hot water', and **the only real obstacle will be the political will to implement the resulting plan. Depolitisation of these issue will be a real test.** In the meantime, apart from formally establishing a new Ministry of Defence, the government can only reduce expenditure and cut the force structure to the minimum necessary.

An alternative approach would be for Montenegro to consider having just a **police force**, with a significant para-military, *gendarmerie*-type formation with a potent coastguard and small heliborne force, with emphasis on rapid deployment and anti-terrorist capability, increasingly sought for peace support deployments. Furthermore, dealing with potential security threats will require as much effort to be placed on implementing full regional strategies and cooperation '**in depth**' with all the neighbouring countries, based on information exchange and making use of limited resources on all sides. Again, any such force structure should primarily be based on an assessment of available funding and 'threats v capabilities' argumentation. However, such options will be dictated by a combination of NATO policy and domestic ability to steer its own course of action.

NATO is sure to take the initiative and invite Montenegro to join the **Partnership for Peace** programme in the near future, since the new state has little in terms of conditionality over its head, and the only real obstacle to speedy progress will be bureaucratic international procedures. While Montenegro has stated eventual NATO membership a priority area, the small state is more likely to play an important role in the soft security area in terms of promoting regional stability and dealing with regional crime. Regional cooperation and engagement in initiatives such as the Adriatic Charter should be encouraged. It is certain that UN (NATO) deployments will be foreseen and serve primarily foreign policy objectives. In terms of potential, these are most likely to be specialised troops numbering not more than 20-30 at any given time.

Conclusion

At all levels, Montenegro will have to 'wake up'. The political elite will have to realise that the past - with its 'games' - is over and that a new prosperous future lies ahead if they choose to steer the ship in that direction, guided by the EU and the West in general. The government also has the responsibility to make the unpopular move and inform the electorate that this will not be an easy and quick undertaking. The electorate for its part will first have to listen and trust, and then much harder, be prepared to endure yet more difficult times. There is a strong possibility that the immediate post-independence reform minded initiatives may soon lose momentum. The EU will be a critical factor in encouraging policy making and must continue to engage the whole region in a resolute and positive manner, placing emphasis on cost-efficiency and coordination with all other international actors.

On the one side Montenegro has little going for it in terms of size, internal lines of communication and low productivity rates, just to name a few. Furthermore, the past decade has not encouraged economic development and reform. However, on the other it has a beautiful coastline that could produce a significant income. Admittedly, this will not be an easy task, considering competition with Croatia and the short-term loss of many Serbs attracted to cheap and modern destinations elsewhere, such as Greece and Turkey. While a heavy focus on coastal tourism seems the most obvious remedy, measures must be undertaken to develop the interior as well. Foreign direct investment should be the priority.

Relations with Croatia are likely to improve over time, most importantly with regard to the Prevlaka issue – with the development of tourism as the main objective within this demilitarised strategic strip of land. Both countries have already signalled a readiness to improve relations and few problems, apart from the issue of war reparations, are likely to arise.

The split within the country will remain and will probably be the hardest hurdle for any elected government to overcome. It can represent an internal destabilising factor if not addressed with care, but one with little potential to have regional implications – at least in the short to medium term. Although it is hard to logically argue that Montenegro, just like Kosovo, is a separate case from neighbouring Bosnia & Herzegovina and Macedonia, in terms of precedents this will have to be accepted – at least for now. This is something that is as much an issue for the West and the EU as it is for the region. Regional calls for equal treatment (e.g. Bosnia & Herzegovina) have already been noted and it will be interesting to see how the principle of the right to self-determination is applicable in one case, and not the other, especially when are all within a radius of a few kilometres.

The region as a whole is slowly moving towards Europe, and integration, preferably full rather than partial, is only a matter of time. Further large scale shocks to this process are unlikely considering the changed broader political landscape. Thus, viewed from a distance and from a strategic perspective, any destabilising occurrence is likely to be short term, such as a possible isolation of Serbia if radicals come to power, affecting only those living in close proximity. As many will argue, life will get better, just have patience and give it time. The question is, how much patience and time are necessary for a region and a country that has gone through so much. Any logical answer to this question will inevitably conclude the importance of continued Western engagement and the role of the EU as the lead driver in the process. Any diversion of attention could change this rather optimistic conclusion.

Endnotes

¹ *B92 Online*, 31st May 2006.

² *Nacional*, 1st June 2006.

³ *International Herald Tribune Europe*, 3rd May 2006.

⁴ IWPR, BCR No. 230, 28th March 2001.

⁵ *Glas Javnosti*, 23rd May 2006 and *Vecernje novosti*, 24th May 2006.

⁶ *Pobjeda*, 11th May 2006.

⁷ Grupa za promjene, Podgorica, 26th May, 2006.

⁸ <http://www.promjene.org/>

⁹ *RTS 1 Belgrade* and *B92 Online*, 27th May 2007

¹⁰ *Politika*, 25th May 2006.

¹¹ *Nezavisne novine* and *B92 Online*, 17th May 2006

¹² , <http://www.srbija.sr.gov.yu/>, 1st June 2006.

¹³ *EU Business*, 22nd May 2006.

¹⁴ *La Stampa*, 25th May 2006

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Budžet Republike Crne Gore za 2006, <http://www.ministarstvo-finansija.vlada.cg.yu/>

Want to Know More ...?

See:

- ICG, Update Briefing No.42, *Montenegro's Referendum*, 30th May 2006.
- Dr. Amadeo Watkins, *Serbia's Strategic Issues: One down, two to go*, CSRC, June 2006.

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ISBN 1-905058-71-3

Published By:

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United Kingdom**

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Defence Academy of the UK

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ISBN 1-905058-71-3