

Belgrade v. Podgorica: the New Cold War

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Denying reality, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic directly violated the federal constitution by appointing the leader of the defeated Socialist People's Party, Momir Bulatovic, as federal prime minister. He still refuses to accept any division of power, democratic compromise or even cohabitation with the new authorities in Podgorica. With the opposition within Serb in disarray, Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic represents Milosevic's most important, and most organised, opponent. For months, Serbia has prevented the newly elected Montenegrin delegation from taking their seats in the upper chamber of the federal parliament. That chamber safeguards Montenegro's constitutional equality with Serbia. In response, Montenegro has opted for an aggressive defence, step by step assuming authority for issues which would normally be under federal competence. The latest polls shows this policy of the Montenegrin administration enjoys wide support.

The Belgrade apparatchik Bulatovic continues to lose favour with the electorate. The steps taken by Montenegro to protect its interests are quite comprehensive. It has halted its transfer of custom revenues to the federal government. It has assumed competence for issuing import-export licenses. It exempted Slovenia from trade sanctions. Officials publicly discourage teenagers from reporting for military draft. The government opened liaison offices in foreign capitals. Last week the Montenegrin government opened a coastal border crossing to Croatia. Visa requirements for foreign tourists are in the process of being unilaterally abolished. The transport ministry has stated that Podgorica will assume ownership of the airports and begin modernising them. To combat inflation, it is almost certain that Montenegro will establish a separate currency.

Summing up the extent of the Belgrade-Podgorica split, Montenegrin Foreign Minister Branko Perovic recently stated, "Practically only monetary and military links remain and nothing else." Meantime, Montenegro continues to irritate the leaders of Serbia by printing newspapers and magazines banned by Serbian authorities. It has licensed ANEM, the network of Serbian independent radio, to begin transmitting to Kosovo. Serbia has responded by regularly confiscating banned papers and imposing daily check-ups of all aeroplanes and trains from Montenegro. Milosevic tried use the celebration of the Orthodox New Year, on January 13, to shore up his supporters in Montenegro. But the effort was half-baked. Only 4,000 people attended the open religious service conducted in heavy rain by Serb Orthodox Archbishop Amfilohije, who was joined on the podium by leaders of Bulatovic's Socialist People's Party. Podgorica expects that the next attempt by Belgrade to destabilise its smaller federal partner might be a set of laws rigidly centralising control of the police, telecommunications and railways. The idea would be to create the legal pretext for a crackdown, when Montenegro resists.

The two former allies are in a cold war, and the loser will be the one that expends its resources faster. In this struggle of attrition, Montenegro enjoys international support, lead by American special envoy for Balkans Robert Gelbard. As a sign of that relationship and an effort to revive its tourist trade Montenegro Airlines expects to begin a regular flight to the United States later this year. The flights are expected to begin in the spring from Tivat, the gateway port for Montenegro's summer tourism industry, to New York. The company is also negotiating for regular flights to either Frankfurt, Berlin or Dusseldorf. Montenegro Airlines has signed a partnership agreement with Alitalia in which the Italian company will provide financial assistance to obtain Boeing 767 wide-body aircraft to fly the 175 Tivat-New York route.

In the context of Yugoslavia, Montenegro is an oasis of democracy. It has embarked on a comprehensive government reform program designed to develop democratic governance structures capable of supporting a vibrant market economy. The platform of the multi-ethnic coalition government envisions three concurrent reform projects in the areas of the judiciary, public administration and local governance. It has also initiated, with support from international experts, a mass voucher privatisation programme. It has passed a law on nongovernmental organisations and taken a liberal attitude toward independent media.

The political dynamic is leading Montenegro towards independence. In practical terms, both the process of democratisation within Montenegro and the cold wind from Serbia make such an outcome inevitable. For the first time, public opinion polls have registered those supporting independence and confederation outnumbering those who favour federation. However in its drive for independence, Montenegro is in the straightjacket of Kosovo. In dealing with Kosovo, the international community is determined to keep alive a third Yugoslavia which is unviable and effectively already dead. Largely because of this international position, Montenegro leaders hesitate to articulate publicly their desire for confederation. But they remain hopeful that the ultimate solution for Kosovo will be constitutional changes in Yugoslavia that despite the obstacles and the current crisis will in the end result in confederation.

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