

Djukanovic Courts Clinton's Support

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All options are open, Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic tells US President Bill Clinton, discussing prospects for a 'realignment of relations' with Serbia - even a possible referendum on independence.

From Montenegro's perspective, there are two conclusions to be drawn from the end of the Yugoslav-NATO conflict.

Firstly, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic has managed to lose yet another one of the string of wars he has waged since 1991. Secondly, going by the statements of Podgorica's leadership, the debate on redefining Montenegro's post-conflict relationship with Serbia is most definitely open.

Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic reiterated that intention in his late Monday night meeting with US President Bill Clinton, as in earlier discussions with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Cologne and with his neighbours in Bucharest and Sofia this month.

The view from Montenegro is that Milosevic, cornered by his own manoeuvrings, is about to see his political career draw to an end. Ravaged Serbia will have to find its own way out of the political cul-de-sac that Milosevic has left them in. As for Montenegro's leadership, they are aware that the 'intention to reassess' alone will play its own part in weakening Milosevic's position.

Montenegro, Djukanovic says, intends to build an open and democratic society, with an eye to greater integration with the rest of Europe. "We can do that on our own, or with Serbia", he adds, stressing that the democratisation of both partners is the key, first to the federation's survival and then its future prosperity.

It is hard to say how this can be achieved, as Montenegrin parliament speaker Svetozar Marovic noted before the Clinton-Djukanovic meeting, as long as Yugoslavia remained "the only country in the world whose president is a indicted war criminal". "Montenegro and Serbia face the question," Marovic said, "whether they will move forward with democracy or backwards with despotism."

Montenegro's position has been further strengthened by its participation in the Conference on South-eastern Europe, and membership of the Pact on the Stability of South-eastern Europe. But it is still not certain how the Montenegrin authorities will broach the issue of reordering the current federation, or how far they will take it once raised.

'Foundations of the Project for the New Ordering of State Relations between Montenegro and Serbia', a text adopted by the government of Montenegro and presented recently to the Conference on South-eastern Europe, offers no more insight.

The document says the reordering of state relations between Montenegro and Serbia is a necessary condition for the "democratic ordering of their state community and the condition of its survival," but it also requires "respect" for both Montenegrin and Serbian "statehood and nation".

It adds a request for equality of states and citizens in the common state, respect for international standards of human rights, including those of minorities, rights of minority peoples, constitutionality and the rule of law - and the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Montenegro. And it suggests that if Serbia does not demonstrate interest in building a state community, together with Montenegro, on these principles, "the objective circumstances will force Montenegro, relying on its interests and respecting the

will of the people, to opt for a different state status".

The question is whether the Montenegrin authorities have the citizenry's support for this grand project, wherever it may eventually lead them.

At the end of one route lies independence. There is a prominent pro-independence movement in Montenegro, which has political embodiment in the activism of the Liberal Alliance. However the party drew a meagre 6.3 per cent of the national vote in the May 1998 general elections, and is only modestly represented in the Montenegrin parliament.

But faced with Milosevic's threats - earlier this year, Belgrade tried to put the Montenegrin police, loyal to Djukanovic, under the direct command of the Yugoslav army - public support for the Alliance has grown. A poll held a few days ago saw support for full independence rise to close on 30 per cent. Another 20 per cent would like to see the present federation changed into a looser confederal arrangement.

These figures are enough to warrant the opening of a wider debate, even if opponents of outright independence presently remain in the majority. In the meantime the pro-independence process grows daily. This week, a group of prominent university professors lent their voice to calls for the 'redefinition of relations' with Serbia, and a non-party political body, the Movement for Independent Montenegro, has been founded in Podgorica.

Aware of this creeping growth the pro-Milosevic Socialist People's Party (SNP) is ready to accept a referendum call sooner rather than later, thereby stifling debate with the 'No' vote they expect now, but might not be able to guarantee later. Presently they control 29 out of 79 seats in the Montenegrin parliament, enough to block any change in the country's constitution, which requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

But Montenegrin Prime Minister Filip Vujanovic says that before the SNP can have its referendum, Belgrade has to recognise Montenegro's wish for a redefinition of relations, whatever the eventual outcome.

If not, he said Friday, the referendum could turn into a vote for or against continued association with Serbia in any form. He argues that to reject Montenegro's wish for equality in federal relations would merely confirm that Belgrade plans to absorb its truculent partner into a 'unitary' state, "which," he said, "I personally think they cannot accept". During the NATO-Yugoslav fighting, Montenegrin polls found 58 per cent in favour of an end to the Kosovo crisis based on an international accord and the granting of substantial autonomy to the Kosovars.

Yet the fighting over, the Yugoslav Army has still has not returned to barracks and a state of war is still in force, restraining human rights in the republic. It is hard to imagine that Milosevic will readily lift the mechanisms of repression that he holds over Montenegro and its domestic public opinion.

Vujanovic thinks little can change in Podgorica before there is a change in Belgrade. In the meantime neither international opinion, nor steps such as signing Montenegro up to the Pact for South-eastern Europe change the realities. "Relations with Serbia," he noted, "are already so complicated that nothing can make them more so".

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