

Montenegro Bides its Time

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This week's meetings between Serbia and Montenegro have left the small republic in a state of confusion. Is Djukanovic backing slowly away from the idea of independence or buying himself space and time to cut free from the federation?

Representatives of all three parties of Milosevic's ruling coalition and the Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists [DPS] met for talks this week. Negotiations focused on the future of the Yugoslav federation, called into question recently by the political conflict between Belgrade and Podgorica.

There were few optimists before the meetings took place, and a lot of nervousness. The major topic at the talks was the Platform on the Redefinition of Relations between Montenegro and Serbia. This is the document Montenegro first put forward at the beginning of August, calling for greater independence and the replacement of the current federation with a loose confederal union.

The first meeting - between Vojislav Seselj's Serbian Radical Party [SRS] and the DPS - was held on October 25 on the Montenegrin island of St. Stefan. Seselj had declined to go to Montenegro, claiming to be ill, but he sent a message saying: "Montenegrin independence will cause a bloody war." After the talks, which lasted just over an hour, journalists were told that the two delegations, both fierce opponents, could not agree on a location for talks on the Montenegrin proposals.

Seselj's Radicals insisted that the talks on the future of FRY should continue at the federal parliament. The DPS, headed by Montenegrin Prime Minister Filip Vujanovic, refused. Ever since the parliamentary elections held in May last year, Montenegro has declined to acknowledge the legitimacy and the legality of the federal parliament.

However, after the meeting, both delegations agreed that inter-party meetings should continue. Moreover, both paid compliments to the other side for "open and cordial talks." Tomislav Nikolic, the head of the SRS delegation, said that their common position was that Yugoslavia must be preserved at any price.

Prime Minister Vujanovic was much more moderate. He stressed that "utmost efforts must be made for Montenegro and Serbia to preserve the union", but added that if negotiations with Serbia fail, the Montenegrin parliament "will decide in which manner and which path will be taken further".

Speaker of the Montenegrin parliament, Svetozar Marovic, did not share Vujanovic's caution. A day after the meeting he headed the DPS delegation at a Belgrade meeting with Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia [SPS] and representatives of the Yugoslav United Left [JUL], headed by Milosevic's wife Mirjana Markovic.

Marovic did not try to hide his delight at having met with "two most influential parties in Yugoslavia", describing the talks as "constructive and well-meaning." He went on: "We didn't arrive with a proposal for division but for the preservation of the union. The Platform is not ideal and it can be changed." Nonetheless, he emphasised that Montenegro will insist on the principle of equality in the federation.

Milosevic's SPS were full of enthusiasm as well. "The FRY is our essential interest. We have agreed to continue the negotiations at the federal parliament and among the parties," SPS representative Gorica Gajevic said.

However, representatives of the DPS did not turn up for the joint press conference with JUL, a party that Marovic has blamed several times in the past for "despotic governance". Reports in the Podgorica daily, Vijesti, suggested that during the JUL meeting with the DPS delegation Dr Markovic had delivered an hour-long monologue leveling accusations against the Montenegrin leadership.

Not everyone was positive about the future. According to Miodrag Vukovic, president of the DPS Executive Committee, the DPS delegations told the Serbs that the only way for the federation to survive would be for Belgrade to give a positive reply to the Platform. A negative reply, he said, would leave Montenegro with only one alternative: "Montenegro as an independent state". He also said on October 27 that Podgorica could not wait indefinitely for a response from Belgrade.

Prime Minister Vujanovic's insistence on further talks and the enthusiasm of his party colleague, Marovic, has completely baffled the Montenegrin public. Days before the meetings, the DPS had insisted that the Montenegrin Platform represented their final word, and that it could not be changed in negotiations with the Serbian leadership. President Djukanovic even recently stated that the FRY was "in fact dead". Marovic effectively denied all this in Belgrade.

DPS coalition partners Zarko Rakcevic's Social-Democratic Party [SDP] and Novak Kilibarda's People's Party reacted vehemently against this. "The DPS must immediately inform its coalition partners of the essence of the talks with Serbia's ruling parties. The Platform has already been agreed in the Montenegrin government and it cannot be changed by Slobodan Milosevic," Kilibarda said. He added that if the DPS intended to preserve the coalition, it could not continue to negotiate with Belgrade on its own.

Rakcevic was even more critical. Alluding to the former war alliance between Milosevic's SPS and Djukanovic's DPS, in effect from the beginning of the 1990s to 1997, he stated: "If the DPS truly wants to return to its old ways, it will be easy for it to gain the support of Milosevic's despotic party, Seselj's fascists and extreme leftists of Mirjana Markovic. On their side, they will find themselves in the company of (Libyan leader Mumamar) Gaddafi and (Iraqi leader) Saddam Hussein.

"However, we in the SDP will not follow this path, but, I believe, neither will the majority of Montenegrins, since this will not lead to Europe, but to Eastern dictatorships."

Rakcevic, whose party supports Montenegrin independence, had warned Djukanovic much earlier: "If you want Yugoslavia, you will not have a coalition."

After the Belgrade meetings and Marovic's statement that "Yugoslavia is a more rational choice, and it has always been close to Montenegro" it seems that Rakcevic and the SDP's patience is slowly running out.

"We would never talk with Milosevic and Seselj", Miodrag Ilickovic, the head of the SDP parliamentary group, concluded.

Meanwhile, the authorities in Pljevlja and Zabljak, where Momir Bulatovic's pro-Milosevic Socialist People's Party are in power, have adopted a resolution not to recognise Montenegrin government decisions that could lead to independence. Podgorica could soon face a fierce reaction from these municipalities.

President Djukanovic has confirmed reports that Montenegro will introduce the German mark as a parallel currency in the republic in several days. According to unofficial reports, after his visit to Germany, Djukanovic secured the support of the German central Bundesbank for this move.

Djukanovic is reported to have promised in return that Montenegro will wait six more months before calling

a referendum on independence. Analysts in Podgorica have interpreted the optimistic statements made by the Montenegrin side as a means of buying of time and avoiding a real conflict with Belgrade, which, as Seselj has announced, could lead to a bloody war.

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