

Montenegro On the Brink

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Outraged by last week's changes to the Yugoslav constitution, the Montenegrin government has started preparing the ground for a referendum on independence.

The constitutional changes passed by the Yugoslav parliament in Belgrade last week have propelled Montenegro into a new phase of intense political crisis - one likely to end in violence.

The revised constitution reduced the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, FRY, to an absurdity. It left the government in Montenegro with no other option but to boycott federal elections expected in October.

Montenegrin, President Milo Djukanovic, immediately began preparing the ground for a referendum on independence.

On July 11, the Montenegrin president met his counterparts from the Czech Republic, Croatia and Slovenia to lobby support and push for vital security guarantees from the West. "Never before has Montenegro been closer to realising its independence," said Djukanovic.

The international community has long argued against the move, aware that it would probably provoke Milosevic into intervening militarily in the tiny republic.

"Should Montenegro be forced to defend its independence, it should not stand alone. By supporting Montenegro, the international community would defend its honour and its policy in the Balkans," Djukanovic said.

On July 7, the United States State Department spokesman reiterated Washington's opposition to Montenegrin independence.

"We have urged President Djukanovic and his government to avoid any precipitous, unilateral moves toward independence, which would provoke Belgrade to respond and could lead to a conflict," the spokesman said.

US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, telephoned Djukanovic on July 13, a US spokesman said, to offer the president an additional \$16.5 million to support democratisation and economic reforms in the republic.

"The main thrust of the phone call was to express her support for democracy in Montenegro and appreciation for the moderate policies that Djukanovic has been following," the spokesman said.

In marked contrast to policy in Washington, Brussels and Moscow, Djukanovic's counterparts at the July 11 meeting did not insist on the "territorial integrity of FRY." The Slovenian and Croatian presidents, Milan Kucan and Stipe Mesic, openly backed Montenegro's right to self-determination. Mesic called on the international community to intervene should the will of the Montenegrin people be challenged.

Czech President, Vaclav Havel was straightforward in his support of a referendum, "He who threatens to

regard a referendum as a provocation, is the one who provokes."

Djukanovic's political advisors argue it is vital to prepare the ground for a referendum before federal elections are officially announced. Aside from international objections, support for such a poll is far from universal in Montenegro. Even Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, is split on the issue, precisely because of international opposition and the likelihood of Yugoslav military intervention.

A senior source in the Montenegrin government told IWPR Belgrade has already set in train logistical preparations for federal elections at Yugoslav Army, VJ, bases across Montenegro and in local council districts controlled by the pro-Milosevic Socialist People's Party of Montenegro, SNP.

The new constitution enables Milosevic to organise federal elections regardless of Montenegrin government objections. The Yugoslav president has the support of local government in northern Montenegro, where the SNP controls the councils, and in the south in Herceg Novi, where the party recently won a local by-election.

On July 14, Djukanovic's lobbying moved closer to home at a meeting with leaders of the Serbian opposition at the luxury resort of Sveti Stefan.

Milan Protic, leader of the Alliance for Change, and Vuk Obradovic of the Social Democrats have already promoted Djukanovic as the "best candidate" to oppose Milosevic in any future direct election for the Yugoslav presidency.

Miodrag Vukovic, an advisor to Djukanovic, said, however, the Sveti Stefan meeting was aimed at sounding out the Serbian opposition parties' position on Montenegrin sovereignty - something they have opposed in the past.

The Montenegrin parties would also seek a boycott of federal elections from the Serbian opposition representatives, Vukovic said.

Such a move would render more acceptable the Podgorica government's position in Montenegro and could influence the opinion of the international community, which still harbours illusions Milosevic could be defeated in a direct election.

But Miodrag Ilickovic, vice president of the Social Democratic Party of Montenegro, SDP, - one of Djukanovic's coalition partners - believes meeting the Serbian opposition is pointless.

"Opposition in Belgrade is fragmented, weak and has no actual power," Ilickovic said. "The FRY has been brought down by these constitutional changes. The state has fallen apart and what remains is a repressive mechanism that can be turned against Montenegro at any moment. But most of the Serbian opposition would enter elections even under these conditions. So what is there to talk about?"

Ilickovic has a point. Deals with the Serbian opposition would not halt the Yugoslav Army should it be ordered by Belgrade to move against the "separatist Montenegrin leadership."

On the nights of July 7 and 8, when the Montenegrin parliament was debating its response to the constitutional changes, Yugoslav troops stationed in the republic were placed on full combat alert. Any move to break with Yugoslavia would have been met by force.

Vuk Boskovic, an aide to the Montenegrin minister of police said the VJ generals "had orders to act." Boskovic believes a conflict with the Montenegrin police would have occurred.

Yugoslav Prime Minister and leader of the pro-Milosevic opposition in Montenegro, Momir Bulatovic, denied the VJ was preparing military intervention in the republic. He accused the Montenegrin leadership of sowing "discord, division and conflict."

"Its consequences could be disastrous for internal peace, order and stability inside Montenegro," Bulatovic said. "Stories they are spreading around the world that the Yugoslav army will attack Montenegro are untrue and unworthy."

Sources from the VJ 2nd army, however, told the Montenegrin weekly magazine Monitor, plans were in place to deploy tanks on the streets of Podgorica and to blockade the Montenegrin parliament and government buildings.

The same sources claimed General Milorad Obradovic, 2nd army commander, had also received special orders for the navy and military police from the VJ Chief of Staff Nebojsa Pavkovic. Units from the 1st and 3rd armies, stationed inside Serbia, were also on alert to lend assistance, as well as troops from the 7th battalion - a paramilitary police formation inside Montenegro, which Milosevic set-up last year.

A senior official in the Montenegrin police said the government was aware of the Yugoslav military plans and "did not fall for this provocation" by voting for a referendum.

Montenegro's state security ordered its special units to monitor all VJ military barracks and facilities in the republic, the official said. The VJ's top commanders in Montenegro were also under police observation, he said.

For now, war has been avoided and may be postponed until federal elections take place. Beyond that things look bleak indeed.

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