

New Montenegrin Crisis

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Slobodan Milosevic's fall from power plunges Montenegro into a political turmoil

Posters placed by the Montenegrin government calling on voters to boycott the recent elections still emblazon billboard sites around the tiny republic's capital, Podgorica. Eighty per cent of population heeded the call and refused to vote.

Podgorica is less than enthusiastic about the recent changes in Yugoslavia. "Kostunica's presidency will change nothing in Montenegro judging by some of his statements - he is a Serbian nationalist," said Momo, a 20-year-old student, reflecting the feelings of many Montenegrins.

Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica has pledged to resolve the crisis over Montenegro's status within the federation, arguably one of the most difficult tasks facing his new administration.

Milosevic's exit has thrown the tiny republic into political turmoil and done little to ease strained relations between Podgorica and Belgrade. The ruling coalition - combining Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, Zarko Rakcevic's Social Democratic party, SDP, and Dragan Soc's People's Party, NS - is in crisis and could fall apart.

With Milosevic gone the NS is pushing Montenegro to embrace the Yugoslav federation. At a news conference on October 12, NS deputy president Predrag Popovic criticised those Montenegrin politicians who have labelled Kostunica's victory illegitimate and warned they could soon find themselves isolated by the international community.

Some DPS members, especially the speaker of the Montenegrin parliament Svetozar Marovic, are also signalling support for continued union with Serbia. Marovic has forged strong links with the pro-Belgrade Socialist Peoples Party, SNP - a group Kostunica now has to keep on side to secure a majority in the federal parliament.

But the problems Kostunica faces in forming a new federal government have complicated negotiations with Djukanovic. The Yugoslav president has to contend with the reality that forces loyal to Milosevic still control the Serbian parliament and key government ministries.

According to convention, when a Serb occupies the Yugoslav presidency, a Montenegrin is appointed federal prime minister. Dependent on the support of Montenegrin SNP deputies to secure a majority in the federal parliament, Kostunica has offered the post to the SNP, a move that could prompt the Djukanovic government to reject the federal administration.

As a sweetener, Kostunica has offered cabinet posts to Djukanovic's DPS, but the concession has been rejected in talks over the last few days.

Director of the Montenegrin Centre for Democracy Srdjan Darmanovic said to give the premiership to the SNP would be to "ignore the will of the majority" of Montenegrins.

"This has opened a new question: Montenegro has to define what it wishes to be in the future," he said.

"Accepting that the SNP has the right to represent Montenegro is a provocation to its citizens."

Within the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, there are marked divisions over how best to handle Montenegro. The DOS election campaign manager, Zoran Djindjic, is far more popular in Podgorica than Kostunica due to his close ties with Montenegrin politicians, including Djukanovic, and his reputation as a pragmatist.

Djindjic, who leads the largest party in the DOS coalition, favours establishing a transition government of 'experts' incorporating representatives from the Montenegrin ruling parties. He envisages a Serbian-Montenegrin union based on shared defence, foreign policy and economic interests. Djukanovic has indicated such a compromise would be acceptable, at least until Serbian parliamentary elections can be organised towards the end of the year.

Kostunica, meanwhile, is perceived as a politician with nationalist aspirations. - although since assuming the presidency he's said he would support referenda in Serbia and Montenegro on the future of the Yugoslav federation.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that Djukanovic's DPS has yet to make clear whether it supports outright independence, some form of federation or whether it plans to reintroduce its manifesto for reforming the federation.

Entitled "Platform on the Redefinition of Relations between Montenegro and Serbia", the document was presented to the federal government back in August 1998. It calls for greater independence and the replacement of the current federation with a loose confederation.

Should Djukanovic opt for independence, the DPS could soon find itself under pressure from the West. After a meeting with Djukanovic on October 13, United States special envoy James O'Brien said, "the USA does not support Montenegrin independence". He said there were new possibilities for "dialogue with democratic forces in Belgrade" which could produce a solution satisfactory to both republics.

And the DPS is by no means unanimous in its support for independence. Such a move could alienate a large number of voters who advocate reintroducing the '98 manifesto. To add to Djukanovic's woes, analysts in Podgorica point out the compromise envisaged in the document is no longer satisfactory to either the pro-independence Liberal Party or to the president's coalition partners in the SDP.

The SDP favours a future alliance with Serbia based on a loose union of internationally recognised sovereign states with some mutual interests. SDP deputy president Ranko Krivokapic said "Montenegro is interested in further negotiations with Serbia and in that sense with Kostunica." But he added that Kostunica is "not regarded as a legitimate FRY representative" in Montenegro.

An official statement from Djukanovic's office on October 18 did, however, refer to Kostunica as President of Yugoslavia.

"Things will settle down after parliamentary elections in Serbia," predicted Miko Zivkovic, the leader of Liberal Party. Although the party has welcomed Kostunica's victory, the Liberals are suspicious his victory has undermined the drive for Montenegrin independence.

"I am sure that Djukanovic will reach an agreement with Kostunica and Djindjic regarding the formation of another Yugoslavia," Zivkovic said with resignation.

One other factor further complicating the situation is the Sandzak, a predominantly Muslim region bordering Bosnia-Herzegovina and straddling areas of Serbia and Montenegro.

Leader of the Party of Democratic Action Sulejman Ugljanin supports Montenegrin independence as a precursor to independence for the Sandzak.

Rasim Ljajic, leader of the Union of Democratic Parties and a member of the DOS coalition, said negotiations on the redefinition of relations between Serbia and Montenegro should start soon. He favours a more decentralised union with greater regional autonomy for Montenegro, the Sandzak and Vojvodina.

"Milosevic has destroyed all the elements of the federation," Ljajic said. "The future state would therefore be able to minimize the ethnic antagonisms which have previously dominated the country."

Only two weeks ago, Kostunica was living in an ordinary Belgrade suburb, driving around in a battered old car. Now it is his turn to wrestle with the great Balkan puzzle. Whether he can produce a solution remains to be seen.

But Kostunica's determination to bring Yugoslavia back into the European fold provides some reassurance that he intends to solve the conundrum using democratic means rather than the strong-arm methods of his predecessor.

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