

# DEMOCRATIC MONTENEGRO AS A FACTOR FOR PEACE IN THE BALKANS

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The political crisis in Montenegro must be added to an already complex political situation and crisis in the former Yugoslavia, whose culmination was Serbia's aggressive war on Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. The West and the EU continue to support a dialogue between Podgorica and Belgrade and ask that Montenegro abstain from declaring independence, even though pro-independence forces won an overwhelming 94% mandate in a referendum. In bilateral talks Montenegro's official proposal "to have two independent states with special ties and specific supra-national structures" envisions a joint foreign policy as well as joint defense structure. Belgrade's view is that no special ties or special relations are required because Montenegrins and Serbs are brothers. The complex historical relations between Montenegro and Serbia, where emotions and myths confront historical fact and reality, mean that the saga of Montenegro has yet to be finished and will take time to play out to its conclusion. The West, however, continues to engage in a contradictory policy of support for the political forces in Montenegro that supported Milosevic and his policy of ethnic cleansing, and who were responsible for the bombing of Dubrovnik. Vlahović considers a democratic and independent Montenegro a pillar on which future regional stability and security will rest.*

The role democratic Montenegro might play in the main security and stability issues in the Balkans, must be analysed in light of the recent conclusions of the EU Council of Ministers, issued after the extraordinary parliamentary elections in Montenegro held on April 22: "The Council welcomed the orderly manner in which the

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elections were held in Montenegro. It called for the immediate resumption of dialogue between Belgrade and Podgorica with a view to the redefinition of the constitutional arrangements of their relations in a renewed federal framework, according to democratic principles and under conditions promoting regional stability. The successful outcome of this dialogue, which should exclude any unilateral actions, would enable EU to continue its political, economic and financial support to Montenegro."

The West (since the US position does not differ significantly from the European) expects Montenegro to refrain from its constitutional and legitimate rights, which are viewed as negative and destructive "unilateral action," and to enter dialogue with Serbia. The outcome of that dialogue is to be a resolution within the "renewed" federal structure. Otherwise, Montenegro seriously risks being deprived of Western support, badly needed in a situation in which our country, although de facto independent, does not have access to funds and support by IMF, World Bank and EBRD.

Thus, a bilateral process of negotiation, in which one side's proposal in crucial points of disagreement is given preferential consideration, results in punishment of the other, weaker side. This Western approach is widely understood in Montenegro as representing open and direct support for pro-Serbian forces in Montenegro.

The outcome of the extraordinary elections in Montenegro is a result of this Euro-American attitude. Naturally, it would be wrong to posit that this was the dominant factor in the process, but the Montenegrin post-election constellation, in which 54% of pro-independence votes are not considered a "reliable majority," now constitutes a political stalemate.

The post-election activities of the Liberal Alliance of Montenegro have only worsened the situation and highlighted internal Montenegrin inadequacies and weaknesses. Their support to the DPS-SDP minority government, conditioned by the request to draft a new Law on Referendum within two months and to hold a referendum on independence within eight months, could result in new extraordinary elections in Montenegro in September or October of 2001.

Montenegro continues to receive contradictory signals from the Serbian side. There are requests for the immediate resolution of the issue of a Montenegrin state, using the argument that Serbia cannot wait for internal political dialogue to produce concrete results. At the same time, Belgrade states that "there is nothing to talk about," since, according to this approach, there is a need only to reformulate the federal constitution, beginning with the elimination of

changes imposed by the Milosevic-controlled federal government in July, 2000.

One of the main reasons why a productive and efficient Belgrade-Podgorica dialogue has not yet begun is due to discrepancies between the two proposals for new relations, i.e., a new federation.

The Montenegrin official proposal is to have two independent states with special ties and specific supranational structures, primarily in defense and foreign policy, which would constitute, in essence, a union of two states (inevitably, a sui generis union, due to the fact that Montenegro is approximately 15 times smaller, excluding Kosovo).

Belgrade's view on the issue is quite different: "aut federation, aut nihil" is the Serbian historical message to its Montenegrin brothers. No special ties or special relations are needed. If independent, Montenegro would simply be a new neighbour-state. Even access to Serbian markets would be closed, and high customs duties imposed, "as for any other foreign state."

The Montenegrin proposal is that the ties between the two republics remain, and that a framework for a common market be retained as a precondition for the process of reconciliation and re-establishment of cooperation among the republics and nations of ex-Yugoslavia, which is an historically justified and necessary process.

One of the main points to emphasize here is that Serbia maintains access to the sea, even if Montenegro becomes independent. Even in less modern and non-interdependent economies, it is in Montenegro's interests to provide an access to the sea for the Continent.

In contrast to the Montenegrin attitude, the Serbs are utilizing an ultimatum approach, which is predicated upon traditional emotions, but also the fears and insecurities of a large portion of the Montenegrin population.

We are thus faced with two incompatible concepts, and the Serbian position is presently favored by the international community. Unfortunately, it is becoming more obvious in time that the EU and US standpoints have little to do with Montenegro or its long-term relations with Serbia.

If one abstracts the issue of Kosovo from the regional political map, what remains is the bleak possibility that the Montenegrin political crisis could escalate within Montenegro, which would be detrimental to the whole region. This "domino effect" reasoning is often used to oppose the idea of Montenegrin independence. I do not believe that this is a realistic approach, as the capacity for internal conflict in Montenegro, which would be sponsored and logistically supported

by Serbia (as occurred eighty years ago as well), has dissipated with Milošević.

Again, there is a *deja vu* situation in the Balkans. The untypical Montenegrin situation (untypical for the Balkans because, for example, the ethnic minorities support the idea of independence and vote mainly for civic parties, not for national ones) is not supported by the democratic West. On the contrary, the whole process of reform and democratization in Montenegro is being weakened, and could even come to a halt or a reversal, because of the notion that Montenegrin independence would lead to new instability in the region. The fact that Western financial support to Montenegro has been blocked supports this thesis.

The West today supports the very political forces in Montenegro which were, during the last ten tragic years of our history, devoted adherents to the Milošević war policy in ex-Yugoslavia and supporters of national-chauvinism and the policies of ethnic cleansing. Unconditional support for the preservation of a "federal state" of so-called Yugoslavia would mean that the xenophobic, anti-Western parties and policies are being given precedence in Montenegro. These forces, commonly known as the "pro-Serbian" parties in Montenegro, cannot and will not bring democracy, respect for individual and collective human rights, and prosperity to Montenegro and to the region as a whole. On the contrary, their *raison d'être* was and still is to promote so-called pure national states and the ideology of cultural and political segregation.

It would be much easier, more efficient, and cheaper to facilitate the democratic expression of the Montenegro will. The democratic, peaceful, constitutional and, therefore, legitimate decision of Montenegrin citizens would eliminate the one remaining open issue from the complex Balkan agenda and transform Montenegro into a small but significant pillar of regional security and stability.