

Montenegro: A Commentary

Thomas P. Melady, Ph.D.

Professor and Senior Diplomat in Residence, Institute of World Politics
United States Ambassador to the Holy See, 1989-1993
United States Ambassador to Uganda, 1972-1973
United States Ambassador to Burundi, 1969-1972
Senior Advisor to the US Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly
President Emeritus of Sacred Heart University
Former United States Assistant Secretary for Post Secondary Education

Timothy R. Stebbins

Graduate Student, Institute of World Politics
Executive Assistant to Ambassador Thomas P. Melady

The day of their restoration will also be the day of deliverance for the world. Small nations have surely played a significant part in humanity's history.

-- David Lloyd George, British Prime Minister from 1916-1922

It has been almost three years since the former Yugoslav republic of Montenegro peacefully attained her independence, becoming the newest fully recognized sovereign state in the world. Though she is still very young and of course has her share of internal problems, Montenegro has made impressive strides towards becoming a fully integrated member of the democratic West.

The referendum of May 21, 2006, which officially severed the union between Serbia and Montenegro, is reflective of the growing and enthusiastic democratic culture of this fledgling nation. Over 85 percent of the total electorate cast their vote. According to BBC News, preliminary election results indicated 230,711 people, 55.5 percent, had voted for independence while 184,954 voters, 44.5 percent, had voted to remain with Serbia.¹ The margin was enough to achieve the 55 percent threshold required for validation under the strictures of the European Union, and the results were formally recognized by the European Union and the United Nations Security Council. The referendum was overseen by the International Referendum Observation Mission (IROM), which included observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Parliamentary



Source: The World Factbook, 2008.

¹ BBC News, "Serbia Accepts Montenegro Result," May 26, 2006. Accessed on October 1, 2008, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5009242.stm>.

Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. IROM declared that “overall, the referendum was conducted in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and other international standards for democratic electoral processes.” IROM also stated that during the voting period “there were no reports of restrictions on fundamental civil and political rights.”²

Some had feared that due to the narrow half-percentage point margin by which the referendum passed, there might be violent ethnic clashes instigated by the large Serbian ethnic population dwelling within Montenegro’s newly established borders. However, on June 3, 2006, independence was formally declared with little strife and was shortly recognized by Belgrade.

The peaceful transition towards Montenegrin sovereignty is reflected in the international tranquility characterizing the country’s popular elections. Ethnic minorities have not experienced many obstacles to political participation, and they participate quite regularly, successfully winning seats in Parliament. Popular turnout is also extremely high as demonstrated by the 86.3 percent turnout for the 2006 referendum. Election participation has reached levels surpassing 70 percent, with the majority of the Montenegrin population being affiliated with one of over 15 different seated political parties in Parliament. It is important to note that as was the case with the referendum itself, many international organizations have sent observer missions to monitor political developments in this country, judging them to be free and fair.

The Montenegrin Republic is currently headed by President Filip Vujanović who has been chief of state since the first election five years ago. The Montenegrin national assembly is composed of 78 members, and the head of government is Milo Đukanović, who has been Prime Minister since February 29, 2008. Most observers believe that this dual executive system forms an effective partnership which serves the people well.

A History of Independence³

In order to understand the ease by which the Montenegrin people have adjusted to civil life in a democracy, a brief look at history is warranted. The desire for liberty is deeply ingrained within the culture of Montenegro. While the 2006 referendum may have signaled Montenegro’s declaration of independence, this event is more of a rebirth than a new beginning. Throughout her history, Montenegro has fought again and again to preserve her liberty from foreign domination.

Originally known as Zeta, Montenegro was once part of the Serbian Nemanjić Empire, but it became independent after the Empire’s collapse in the early 15th century.

² International Referendum Observation Mission, “Referendum on State-Status, Republic of Montenegro (Serbia and Montenegro),” May 21, 2006. Accessed on October 1, 2008, at www.osce.org/item/19150.html.

³ For more information, please see Dennis P. Hupchick, The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002, pp. 75-164.

Montenegro enjoyed intermittent periods of autonomy for much of the 16th century and 17th century, facing near constant interference from the expanding Ottoman Empire. However, the Turks never succeeded in fully subjugating the tiny Balkan country, and by the end of the 17th century, the Ottomans had been defeated in the Great Turkish War and were forced to temporarily abandon their attempts at dominion. In the succeeding War of the Holy League, Ottoman forces were defeated by Jan III Sobieski outside of Vienna in 1683. Over the next several centuries, the Turkish presence was slowly driven out of the Balkans.

King Nicolas⁴

After the assassination of his uncle, Danilo II, in 1860, Nicolas Petrovic ascended the throne of Montenegro. He and his wife, Milena, had 12 children of whom six married into royal or aristocratic European families. These marriages generated great political capital as they granted Nicolas access to many of the major power brokers of the continent, including the cousin of Russia's Tsar Alexander III and King Victor Emmanuel of Italy.

Nicolas' reign was to have a positive effect upon the Montenegrin people. He was a great reformer who undertook many steps toward forging the representative republic his people enjoy today. On St. Nicholas Day, December 12, 1905, he introduced Montenegro's first formal Constitution. According to the new charter, the nation was now officially a constitutional—but not a parliamentary—monarchy. This new structure paved the way for many legal reforms which were more in line with those standards found in western nations like France where Nicolas was educated. These reforms included recognition of basic human rights, allowing for freedom of speech and property rights. Montenegro also saw her education system reformed under the guidance of Nicolas, who opened many new schools, resulting in a dramatic increase in the literacy rate.

Peace during Nicolas' reign was short lived; the Turks, angered over Montenegrin support of Herzegovian rebels, launched a series of coordinated invasions in an attempt to finally secure dominion over their old enemy. The Ottoman forces under command of Omer Pasha Latas were defeated at the Battle of Novo Selo and were quickly brought to the negotiation table through the intervention of Russia and France, who were both eager to protect their Balkan ally. In September 1862, Latas signed a cease-fire agreement, to which he only briefly adhered. The renewed Turkish assault was routed at the Battles of Vucji Do and Bjelopavlici in 1876. These battles were vital for many reasons, but most importantly because they drew great attention from the international community. Europe rejoiced that this “race of mightier mountaineers”⁵ as Tennyson called them, had triumphed over the forces of despotism. British statesman, William E. Gladstone, lauded them from the halls of Parliament as “a bunch of heroes such as the word [sic] has rarely

⁴ For additional details, see Whitney Warren, Montenegro: The Crime of the Peace Conference. New York: Brentano's, 1922, pp. 6-40.

⁵ Extracted from Alfred Lord Tennyson's sonnet, “Montenegro,” which was originally published in *The Nineteenth Century. A Monthly Review*, No. III, May 1877.

seen,” whose “braveries and battles for independence...surpass those of the ancient Hellenes at Thermopylae and at Marathon.”⁶

In 1878, the Ottomans were again forced to negotiate a truce due to increasing pressure from St. Petersburg. The Congress of Berlin of the same year officially recognized both Serbia and Montenegro as independent principalities. Apart from drawing the official borders of these new nations, the Congress also included what was known as “Protocol X” which gave the Austro-Hungarian Empire police jurisdiction over the port of Bar. This element was to have grave consequences in the future as it set the precedent for imperial intervention into the Balkan states, which would eventually lead to the annexation in 1908 of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Empire. It was this action that would inspire a young Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip to take the cause of liberty into his own hands and with it all of Europe.

World War I and the Treaty of Paris

In Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian Imperial throne. This single act would serve as a catalyst for a series of developments that would culminate in World War I. On July 24, nearly one month after the assassination, the Serbian Premier Nikola Pachitch, wary of the rumblings across Europe, “telegraphed to the Montenegrin government to find where it stood. In three hours a reply came to Belgrade, containing these words: ‘In any event, Montenegro will share, today as always, good and ill with Serbia. Your fate shall be ours!’”⁷ Further, King Nicolas “followed up the first message with this ringing statement of fact: ‘My Montenegrins are already at the border, ready to die for the defense of the Sacred Common Cause.’”⁸ It is worth noting that Montenegro made her pronouncement before Russia or any of the other great nations had declared for Serbia.

However, it is here that a cruel irony was set in motion, one that would not be fully revealed or understood until after the war had come to a close. The strains of Serbian nationalism, still present in Belgrade’s government, began to lay the groundwork for the annexation of Montenegro and the creation of a united Greater Serbia. In 1918, Austro-Hungarian troops withdrew from Montenegro. King Petar of Serbia exploited the absence of his father-in-law, King Nicolas, and sent in his army, now under the command of the French. At first the Montenegrins welcomed their “blood brothers” as liberators, but it was not long before the army’s conduct revealed their true purpose as an occupying force.

By this time, King Nicolas had been in exile in France for nearly three years, and though he was still the nominal sovereign, it became increasingly clear that his throne was being usurped. In desperation, Nicolas wrote to the French government “asking leave to return to his own land. M. Pichon, Minister of Foreign Affairs, replied that conditions there

⁶ These quotes were extracted from William Gladstone’s speeches to the House of Commons in 1877 and 1895 respectively.

⁷ Whitney Warren, p. 13.

⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

were too uncertain. But he added: ‘Your Majesty may be assured that the troops placed under the command of General Franchet d’Esperey will neglect nothing to assure in your kingdom the maintenance of order, and that they will put into practice the respect of the constitutional authorities as well as of the liberties of the people of Montenegro.’”⁹

Nicolas’ fears were well founded. On November 11, 1918, unification supporters chose most of the delegates for the Podgorica Assembly. However, some delegates demanded a restoration of Montenegro’s sovereignty. In order to ensure the desired outcome, which was unification, the Assembly building was encircled by a detachment of the army. Consequently, the Podgorica Assembly, during its November 13, 1918, session, “unanimously” and “by acclamation” decided the following:

- ◆ King Nicolas I and his dynasty would be dethroned forever from the Montenegrin throne;
- ◆ Montenegro would unite unconditionally with Serbia in one state under the dynasty of Karadjordjevic and so united “enter in mutual homeland our three-named people: Serbs, Croats and Slovenes....”¹⁰

Thus, the tragic irony is that the first nation to declare herself on the side of liberty became the only Allied country annexed by another at the close of World War I. She was betrayed, as many Montenegrins believe, by the “blood brothers” she had risen to protect. Unification had stripped Montenegro of her identity by political intrigue under the threat of force, and, in the end, Montenegro had lost even her name; the Black Mountains were administratively declared a region of Yugoslavia called Zeta, the original name it had under the Serbian Empire five centuries earlier.

Montenegro Reborn

With the referendum of May 2006, Montenegro regained her cherished sovereignty and her people once again became citizens of an independent state. The successes of this small Balkan country over the past few years are extremely impressive.

Similarly, the economic progress made by Montenegro in this same timeframe is nothing less than astounding. Leading up to the referendum, there was speculation that the proposed separation from Serbia would damage the economic capacity of Montenegro; however, this has hardly been the case. As of 2007, this country of only 679,000 boasted a gross domestic product of approximately \$3 billion (2.117 billion Euros). Her real GDP expansion rate as of 2007 was estimated at 7.5 percent, placing the Montenegrin economy among the fastest growing in the world.¹¹

⁹ Whitney Warren, p. 23.

¹⁰ Extracted from the “History of Montenegro” on the Web site, www.montenet.org/history/podgskup.htm. Accessed on October 2, 2008.

¹¹ The World Factbook, “Montenegro,” on the Web site, www.cia.gov. Accessed on October 2, 2008.

The Montenegrin constitution finds its philosophical orientation rooted in the idea of natural rights. Article 15 states: "All citizens are free and equal regardless of any particularities and/or other personal attributes. Everyone shall be equal before the law." These rights are guaranteed to be inviolable and protected by the constitution itself. Although these principles are in place, there is still work to be done to establish and uphold them in practice. In addition, there are other challenges such as human trafficking, which while illegal is still quasi-pervasive due to internal corruption that might be expected of a nation still recovering from Communist rule.

Although they cannot be overlooked, these challenges must be viewed in the context of the Balkans as a whole and by comparison to Montenegro's neighbors, Albania, Serbia and Macedonia. The internal peace in Montenegro is perhaps one of the greatest examples of the important strides that this nation has made. In a region still reeling from the bloody conflicts of the 1990s, Montenegro has been able to keep her well-defined ethnic communities, the Albanians, Serbs, Croats and Macedonians, at peace with each other. While there is still much work to be done, all that has been accomplished deserves recognition. The world community is fortunate that on the shores of the Adriatic, a people whose nationhood traces back centuries, have fulfilled their right to self-determination and are once again citizens of a sovereign state.