Montenegro: A Polity in Flux, 1989-2000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In attempting to understand Montenegro’s role in the process of Yugoslavia’s disintegration, there are some tangible obstacles for the researcher. Primarily, this is because there is a distinct lack of accessible documentation available, and thus Montenegro’s role is often overlooked in the wider body of literature dealing with state collapse in Yugoslavia and the subsequent consequences. Moreover, many of those in power in the 1990s remain so today, and have a vested interest in obscuring uncomfortable or inconvenient facts and promoting selective narratives. This study of Montenegrin politics in the 1990s, therefore, represents the opening exchange in what the team hopes will generate more extensive debate on the controversies of that period. Given the political, ideological and ethnic divisions in Montenegro, there is little consensus on the events of the 1990s, and herein the team attempts to deal with those competing narratives. There are numerous identifiable controversies that are worthy of more extensive research and, thus, scholarly debate about them. The chapter deals with what the team regarded as the key issues and controversies, while leaving scope for further dialogue and debate.

The first controversy addressed is that of the change of leadership fuelled by anti-government protests that had taken place throughout 1988 and early 1989. The ‘January Coup’ represented the zenith of discontent that had largely been driven by Montenegro’s (and Yugoslavia’s) economic crisis. However, the protests in the Montenegrin capital, Titograd, were more than simply a spontaneous manifestation of popular discontent. Protests that began as ones driven solely by economic discontent were exploited, if not engineered, by a younger political elite operating from within the Montenegrin League of Communists, who enjoyed the support of official Belgrade. The protests led to a change of leadership, albeit a change within the system in which those who supported a pro-Belgrade position came to prominence. It brought a younger generation of elites to power that had loyalties outside Montenegro. But more still remains to be learned about the dynamics of the protests, the competing agendas of groups within the protestors and the role of Slobodan Milošević and official Belgrade in supporting their activities.

And it was this very elite that were in power during the onset of the war in Croatia in 1991. Many, who remain in prominent positions today, have sought to present
Montenegro as being a victim of Serbian coercion; of being naïve, or of having acted in defence of Yugoslavia. Be that as it may, many of the republic’s most prominent politicians adopted hard-line positions, positions which they have subsequently sought to play down as regional dynamics have changed. Montenegrin citizens were subject to state-sponsored propaganda (channelled primarily through the newspaper *Pobjeda* and Montenegrin state television) which was disseminated with the intention of spreading fear and creating a war psychosis, while opponents of the war were marginalized and persecuted. Rhetoric, symbolism and imagery of wars of the past was utilised to justify the actions of the government and prepare Montenegrins for the upcoming ‘War for Peace’. Herein, the chapter analyses how this was achieved and what the consequences of it were; particular attention is given to the role of the troika of Milo Đukanović, Svetozar Marović and Momir Bulatović in forging war. While the ICTY has brought charges against a number of military leaders, questions remain over where responsibility for the attack on the Dubrovnik area.

Montenegro’s opposition and ethnic minorities were also subject to significant pressure during the ‘War for Peace’, with anti-war activists being labelled as traitors. They were also marginalized during the March 1992 referendum which led to the creation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Furthermore, controversy also remains over the events in the Montenegrin Sandžak between 1992 and 1995. The arrest and trial of the leadership of the Montenegrin branch of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the subsequent “Bijelo Polje Trials” in 1994 were the clearest manifestation of the government’s repressive policies against the republic’s minorities and, at the very least, their failure to protect them.

It was, however, the 1997 split within the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) that represents the most cathartic political event in Montenegro in the 1990s. The split led to a purge within the party, in which elements loyal to Belgrade was marginalized. This fundamentally changed the orientation of politics in the republic. But questions remain over how Đukanović and has allies wrested control of the party. After the split, which was personified by the conflict between Milo Đukanović and Momir Bulatović (and Slobodan Milošević), the conflict, originally driven by a pro- and anti-Milošević dynamic, evolved into one over Montenegro’s statehood. Muslims and Albanians, previously marginalized, became natural allies of the Đukanović-led government’s ‘anti-Milošević coalition’.

Tensions generated by the DPS split and the aforementioned divisions were exacerbated by the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Conflicts between
advocates of independence and advocates of continued union with Serbia brought the republic to the brink of civil war, and relations between ruling elites in Podgorica and Belgrade worsened considerably during the Kosovo crisis, leading to widespread speculation that Milošević would use his proxies in Montenegro to mount a coup against the government. Such a scenario failed to materialise, but the bitterness and distrust between Montenegrins would be felt for many subsequent years. The fall of the Milošević regime did not end the conflicts within Montenegro over the question of the republic’s statehood, and although Djukanović signed the Belgrade Agreement (which led to the establishment of the joint state of Serbia and Montenegro), his government continued to make preparations for an independence referendum, which would ultimately lead to the parting of Serbia and Montenegro and an independent status for all of the six republics of the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).