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The SEER tries to draw attention to new research results and the latest analysis about the ongoing process of political and social changes in the south-east of Europe.

The SEER tries to create more understanding for the importance of the elaboration of democratic structures in industrial relations.

The SEER tries to combine contributions from different disciplines and “political schools” into an information package of interest for policy makers, researchers, academics and trade unionists from various backgrounds.

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The Montenegrin Transition: A Test Case

Introduction

The troublesome attempts at transition in the former Yugoslavia have so far led to major security crises and humanitarian disasters in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and most recently, Kosovo. With the closing of the conflict fault lines in Bosnia and, increasingly, Kosovo, the question emerges of whether the focus of the internal differences will now move to the southern republic of Montenegro, where there is a simmering confrontation between the political forces who are pro-Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and those in favour of the democratising tendencies embodied by the charismatic Montenegrin President Milo Djukanović.

The beginning of the conflict between the dominant political orientations in Serbia and Montenegro can be traced back to the removal of the former Montenegrin President and Head of the Democratic Party of Socialists (the former Communists), Momir Bulatović, who remains a strong Milošević supporter and ally. In January 1998, after an election that brought victory to Djukanović, newly reformed but also from the ranks of the former Communists, public protests were staged in the capital of Podgorica that were accompanied by violence and armed rioting in the streets. The Republic narrowly escaped a broader civil conflict, mainly due to the restrained approach by the police forces. Eleven months afterwards, the political situation in Montenegro is much more stable, but the main differences between the two opposing political camps remain. The closing of the front line in Kosovo, due to international mediation, leaves the door open for a renewal of conflict in Montenegro by the Milošević regime.

The main issue arising from the controversial Yugoslav developments over the past few years, mainly in the differences between the politics of Serbia and Montenegro, is whether a successful transition can be accomplished if it is the smaller part of the two-part federation that is the engine of change, and in what ways the political violence that the Serbian regime regularly uses to accomplish its political aims can be countered by peaceful means in the smaller Republic. The answers to these questions will determine to what extent the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia can become integrated into modern Europe, and how far it has progressed in developing the democratic potential necessary to effect political change without resorting to political violence.

Critical elite interests

To understand the current differences between Serbia and Montenegro and the consequent position of FRY internationally, it is useful briefly to consider the role of the national and political elites and their interests in Balkan politics, especially in the development of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. This civil conflict, with all of its devastating human, political, military and social consequences, has largely determined the prospects for peaceful and democratic development of the newly emerged states in the former Yugoslav territory. Its onset was as sudden as it could be, its se-

verity was totally unexpected by most people in the country and overseas, and its political consequences are such that most of those directly concerned are still struggling to come to terms with the extent of the damage done to their societies.

The main driving force behind the Yugoslav war(s) were not the nations suffering from a delayed reaction to the traumatising history of their mutual relations, as is often argued, but rather the national elites struggling to maximise their particular interests in the given context, in the first place to maintain a firm hold on power in circumstances where the Communist system was dying away. The elites in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and, of course, Serbia and Montenegro clung to ethnic determinations of national interests by a shared instinct of political survival the very moment it became clear that their former ideology was no longer current or survivable. The same officials who had argued against “the curse of nationalism” as opposed to a globalistic, or at least federalistic, Communism or Socialism, were now stern advocates of “national interests first”, and only then “abstract notions of Yugoslav commonness”. In turn, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina held national referenda, proclaimed independence, and were assaulted by the Yugoslav Army struggling to preserve its identity, its pensions, its privileges and its political support in Serbia and Montenegro.

In the course of the wars in the three republics, several million people either lost their lives or their property, children and any bearable life prospects. Several million were displaced in a distressing semi-permanent manner where they had no realistic chance of returning to their homes, and yet the threat of having to return remained hanging over their heads in their new host countries, preventing them from fully engaging in building a new life for themselves and their children. Several tens of thousands of people, namely former party apparatchiks, criminals and newly found national advocates, simultaneously became extremely prosperous. Land and property prices in cities such as Belgrade sky-rocketed in the mid-1990s with waves of refugees coming in from the lost territories in Croatia and Bosnia. Monopolies were strengthened overnight through political protection and promotion, and through a state-imposed racket on all independent enterprises and truly market-based businesses. State money was quickly syphoned away into private pockets through fictitious contracts with private firms established overnight, and major state officials suddenly ended up with large, “successful” firms of their own ranging from music production to the import and export of all manner of goods including textiles, building materials and oil.

Paramilitary units that wreaked havoc in the former Yugoslav republics suddenly became formations of respectable standing in their communities. Their leaders started to be seen regularly at public conventions and high-profile social gatherings of all kinds. They were received by top political leaders and perceived by the majority populations as emanations of political authority. They became untouchable by the crumbling legal system, and through political kick-back deals between the Balkan warlords and high officials of the international community they also became untouchable by international justice. The Hague Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has thus not yet raised indictments against the paramilitary leaders most guilty of atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. They enjoy full freedom of movement and a high social profile in

their communities, a profile imposed by the criminal political elites, and not spontaneously supported by majority populations. The atmosphere thus created was one of a detention camp instead of a society, where political elites wheel and deal in the life prospects and daily fortunes of the miserable detainees, while political actors on the international scene visit them in luxurious style and exchange favours with them. The grassroots became totally silenced, and the top brass became powerful like never before. The lack of democracy was total, and it was only a small step from this state of affairs to full dictatorship.

At that point, a crack appeared in the political body of “rump” Yugoslavia – represented in the reformist wing of the Democratic Party of Socialists, led by the former Prime Minister of Montenegro Milo Djukanović, which renounced violence and the former strategies of political dominance and called for the opening of the country to foreign influences and for introducing internationally-recognised standards of liberalisation and democratisation. This call, along with its echoes in Montenegro and in Serbia, caused panic reactions in the conservative circles who had started to believe that they would be able to maintain an oasis of Communism in the heart of Europe.

Djukanović realised that he would be politically eaten alive by Milošević if he agreed to play along. He decided to go it alone, no matter what the cost, and to mobilise as many of his former Party comrades as possible for the effort. Starting with a minority in the Montenegrin DPS, Djukanović succeeded in garnering a large amount of additional public support through using his Premiership to foster a working alliance with the Ministry of the Interior and through applying Government competences in the area of the control of information and public campaigning. Bulatović, the pro-Milošević Montenegrin President at the time, was too slow to react and was eventually trapped in a political limbo from where he was temporarily rescued by Milošević through his legally controversial appointment to the Federal Prime Ministership. At the moment, Yugoslavia is ruled by a federal government unrecognised by one of the two constituent republics, by a federal Parliament that is legally questionable, and by the practical policy of suppression of the independent media, intellectuals and university in Serbia as well as the attempt to cause political instability in Montenegro.

Apart from this general picture of relations between Serbia and Montenegro, both republics are still largely governed by perpetuating monopolies. Standards of competence and qualifications do not yet govern official appointments and policies, and criteria of political loyalty and personal familiarity still prevail. In Montenegro, this is the case almost as much as in Serbia. Montenegro is increasingly developing its own foreign relations, but in constitutionally dubious contexts and with personnel who are poorly equipped to deal with international organisations and global decision-making mechanisms. A reform of the government is underway, directed by the Montenegrin Ministry of Justice, but the more urgent personnel reform in key sectors of the Government is still lacking. The composition of the Government itself is more democratic than before, with three coalition parties sharing the responsibilities (the DPS, the National Party, and the Social Democratic Party). Yet, despite this structural democratisation of the Government, direct communication between the top brass and the constituents is still appallingly scarce, and all decisions are being made by a narrow circle

of political leaders grouped around President Djukanović and Prime Minister Filip Vujanović.

The battles within the power-broking circles are one matter, but individual political and economic interests seem to be the key to the analysis of present-day Montenegrin political life. Where elite interests once dictated an alliance with Serbia in order to survive, a loyalty to the Montenegrin cause is imperative now, although it is not at all clear what that cause is, whether it is the same all the time or whether it shifts with the changes in the political fortunes of certain key political actors in the Republic.

The transitional potential of Montenegro

The transitional potential of Montenegro is limited by at least two major factors. The first is the small size of the Republic, with a population numbering barely 600 000. The second is the heritage of the “top-to-bottom” style of political governance which has sometimes seemed substantively democratic in its appearance and concrete policies (respect for human rights and political freedoms, freedom of the press, etc), but which has nevertheless never been structurally democratic in that decisions, whether “bad” or “good”, have emanated from the centre.

Montenegro, situated on the coast of the Adriatic and south of its much larger Yugoslav counterpart, has a limited economic capacity to impose its will at the federal level. It has survived the years of sanctions by engaging in various semi-legal forms of enterprise and is now being targeted by tendentious legal regulation at the federal level, cutting back on many of its revenues.

The most recent case had to do with the import of cars on which the Montenegrin government charged special taxes, but waived customs duties. Many Serbs purchased and registered cars in Montenegro, which is a practice totally in accordance with the laws and the Constitution, until the Serbian government issued a “decree” authorising the police to seize cars bearing Montenegrin registration plates but driven by Serbian residents. The trade in cars stopped and the financial impact on Montenegro was severe. This is but one example of the economic war the two republican leaderships wage against one another.

Repressive practices by the Serbian state towards Montenegro has considerably strengthened the independence movement in the smaller Republic. One of the coalition parties in power in Montenegro, the Social Democrats, are stern advocates of independence. Along with the Liberals, and an increasing proportion of the population, they might soon be calling for a referendum on independence, a move Djukanović, under pressure from the international community, strongly opposes.

Montenegro is torn between opposing tendencies. It suffers from a major personnel ballast of previous times, and yet it has a hope to join the world and leave its patriarchal and communist past behind. With its complex ethnic population, composite government, established parliamentary culture and dangerous security environment, it is a true test case for Balkan transitions.

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