

TWO SOLITUDES:

Ethnic versus Civic in Contemporary Montenegrin Politics

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1 Excerpt from the poem *The Other Shadow* by Ken Smith. In: *Spaces of Identity*. Vol.1, iss. 2, June 2001, <http://www.spacesofidentity.net>.

2 For a complete text of the *Belgrade Agreement* cf. *Polazne Osnove za Uredjenje Odnosa Srbije i Crne Gore*. In: *Prve Crnogorske Nezavisne Elektroske Novine* (here after PCNEN). Dokumenti, Podgorica, March 16, 2002, <http://www.pcnen.cg.yu>.

3 In the case of Montenegro and because we are referring to a less than genuine change of political vista on the part of the leadership of the DPS, one has to take into account the fundamental difference between the concepts of ›adoption‹, which presupposes fundamental revision of one's political credo, and that of ›appropriation‹ representing the means for weathering a seemingly short-lasting political storm.

4 The term ›hybrid regimes‹ is one of many classifications of political systems such as: ›semi-democracy‹, ›virtual democracy‹, ›electoral democracy‹, ›pseudo-democracy‹, ›illiberal democracy‹, ›semi-authoritarianism‹, ›soft authoritarianism‹. The multitude of definitions indicates not only the different analytical approaches regarding the concept of democracy, but also shows a particular chaos of identity. – Cf. Diamond, Larry: *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP 1999; Zakaria, Fareed: *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*. In: *Foreign Affairs* 76 (Nov./Dec. 1997); Linz, Juan J.: *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Boulder/Col.: Lynne Rienner 2000; Janos, Andrew: *East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of Borderlands From Pre- to Postcommunism*. Stanford/Cal.: Stanford UP 2000.

5 Tadić-Mijović, Milka/ Djuranović, Draško: *Srećna Nova 1992* (Esp. the section: *Predsjednikova Rijec*). In: *Monitor*, Br. 596. Podgorica, March 22, 2002, pp. 10-15.

6 The reference to a ›thin red line‹ is borrowed from Popović, Milan: *Montenegrin Mirror: Polity in Turmoil*

*It depends who you heard it from.
It depends on the question you ask.
It depends how you ask it.
It depends in which language.
(Ken Smith, The Other Shadow)¹*

In the early morning hours of March 14, 2002 and after a prolonged and secretive negotiation in Belgrade, the Montenegrin President Milo Djukanović and the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić surprised the EU mediator Mr. Javier Solana. At around 3 a.m. that morning they walked into his temporary office in Belgrade's federal building and presented him with a document that was hastily put together and entitled *The Basis for the Redefinition of the Relations Between Serbia and Montenegro*. According to this document the new federal state would be called Serbia and Montenegro and its institutions would have ›little continuity with the institutions of the present Federal Republic of Yugoslavia‹. The newly formed *Council of Ministers* would coordinate work in the areas of foreign affairs, defence, international economic relations, domestic economic policy and the protection of human rights and the minority rights. The parliament of this new state would have only one house.² This document represented everything the EU officials were hoping for. Most importantly, it introduced the three-year long moratorium on the referendum on Montenegrin independence. The Rubicon was crossed and the new and somewhat unusual state was created. After eleven years of virtual existence the so-called *Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (FRY) was formally dissolved but the common state of Serbia and Montenegro was preserved. ›This is the new beginning‹, stated the architect of the new state, Mr. Javier Solana, with obvious satisfaction.

This signing of the *Belgrade Agreement* signified the final phase of the process of simultaneous appropriation and dissolution of the concept of Montenegrin sovereignty by its strongest political party, the *Democratic Party of Socialists* (DPS).³ In spite of the façade of a coalition government in Montenegro, the country was and still is essentially ruled by the dominant DPS. This fact puts the Montenegrin political system within the category of the so-called ›hybrid regimes‹.⁴ More recent developments on the Montenegrin political scene (from March 2002 onwards) indicate that this appropriation of independentist agenda by the DPS served multiple goals. First it was means for marginalizing the work of the opposition parties (independentists, as well as those favouring a unitary state formation) by resorting to a well-known method of exclusion through appropriation. Secondly, it represented an effort in assuring the political longevity for the DPS and its current leadership. Thirdly, it served as reassurance for the US and the EU leaders that the ruling elite in Montenegro could still be their political partner. Finally, it represented yet another attempt to manipulate the electoral body in Montenegro and to dissolve a sizable plurality favouring independence and sovereignty. With this in mind it seems plausible to conclude that the guiding principle for the DPS and its leaders was the preservation of their power-base in Montenegro rather than that of seeking less radical ways of materializing election campaign promises.⁵ Crossing the ›thin red line‹ that divides healthy compromises in the process of securing the future independence of Montenegro from the urge to preserve and protect one's power is nothing new for this tiny state.⁶ The Montenegrin history represents a succession of attempts and failures of its elites/rulers to hold on to power for as long as possible. Historical parallels notwithstanding, this new effort has its own specific internal dynamics and its own phases of development that are worth remembering.

In the late fall of 2000 the government of Montenegro presented its Serbian counterpart a document entitled *The Foundations of New Relations between Montenegro and Serbia*.⁷ This document expressed the need to redefine the present relations between the two republics of FR Yugoslavia and emphasised the necessity for Montenegro to reclaim its long ago surrendered independence and sovereignty. While recognising the inadequacy of a unitary state formation and the need for opening a dialogue with Serbia, the government of Montenegro proposed a loose union of independent states as the most desired model of governance in the region. The Montenegrin proposal was based on the new version of a post-Westphalian concept of relative and limited sovereignty and on a new and equally post-Westphalian concept of associative and democratic inter-dependence. It described the proposed option as the one favoured by the majority of



[1991-2001]. Podgorica: Nansen Dialogue Centre 2002.

7 The complete text of the Montenegrin proposal is available in the online edition of PCNEN, Podgorica: <http://www.pcnen.cg.yu>.

8 Even though the term ›FR Yugoslavia‹ (FRY) is widely used to describe the former union of Serbia and Montenegro, the reality of it is that from 1991 to the present, the FRY represented an empty historical and political shell, a provisional entity and para-state structure whose legitimacy and validity lessened with every new day. In spite of the appearance of a single unified state, from 1997 onwards Montenegro and Serbia functioned as two separate and *de facto* independent states with their own financial, economic and political institutions. The only shared functions are those related to the military and the air space control. For the complete text of Koštunica's proposal cf. PCNEN, Podgorica: <http://www.pcnen.cg.yu>.

9 The amendments to the federal constitution imposed by Slobodan Milošević prior to the presidential elections of 2000 and without the consent of the current government in Montenegro had positioned this republic not as an equal partner within the federation but only as 27th electoral district in FR Yugoslavia. Such defining of Montenegro's role in the federation had placed it in the same legal category as any other electoral district in Serbia proper.

10 Vlahović, Petar: The Serbian Origins of the Montenegrins. Beograd, 21/09/2000. In: Serb Land of Montenegro Web Site: <http://www.njegos.org/vlahovic.html>. For an interesting analysis of the duality of Montenegrin character cf. Banac, Ivo: The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics. Ithaca/NY: Cornell UP 1984, pp. 270-291, and Simić, Andrej: Montenegro: Beyond the Myth. In: Danopoulos Constantine P./ Messas, Kostas: Crises in the Balkans. London, Colorado: Westview Pr. 1997, p. 122.

11 Assmann, Jan: Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism. Harvard: Harvard UP 1997, p. 7. Also cf. Banac 1984 and Wachtel, Andrew B.: Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Policies in Yugoslavia. Stanford: Stanford UP 1998.

the citizens of Montenegro. Furthermore, the government stressed the need for a referendum in Montenegro to test the popular sentiment towards the idea of a Montenegrin independence and sovereignty.

Several weeks later, Belgrade responded. The newly elected president of the so-called *Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (FRY), Vojislav Koštunica, presented his *Proposal for the Constitutional Redefinition of FR Yugoslavia*.⁸ This document reiterated the need to preserve, at all costs, FR Yugoslavia as a unitary state. Proposed constitutional changes were just a matter of legal cosmetics and aimed at preserving Montenegro's status as one of the municipalities within the larger structure. The new president was rather careful not to propose any substantial changes (constitutional or otherwise) that would counter earlier constitutional amendments imposed by Slobodan Milošević.⁹ The document characterized the potential secession of Montenegro as a deliberate act aimed at breaking up the country and also pointed out the need for a dialogue between the contesting parties.

These two documents not only summarised the popular sentiments in Montenegro and Serbia with regards to the issue of internal restructuring of the common state (or its disappearance for that matter) and the possibility for doing so in a meaningful way, but also exposed the emerging fault lines between the elites in power in the two republics. Moreover, it set apart even further the already politically and ideologically polarized population of Montenegro.

Until some ten years ago conversation about Montenegrin sovereignty and the revival of the state's independence was a rare occurrence and people usually spoke about it *sotto voce*. Those who are opposed to this political concept (*unitarists*), and those who deny its right of existence and political expression (*advocates of the Serbian expansionist nationalism*) are many, and their political credos differ on more than one level. However, they all share a common thread: the perception of Montenegrins as an integral part of a larger Serbian ethnic body of evidence.¹⁰ Such perception is based upon a historical narrative that elevates the role of Montenegro in holding together and preserving the construction of the Serbian national mythos. This narrative consists of many elements that are interdependent and display certain proto-scientific characteristics. I will briefly mention two general categories within which these elements are positioned.

The first category can be delineated by the fact that the traditional culture, history and the general cultural matrix ascribed to Montenegrins have been analysed almost exclusively within the Serb national paradigm and have been seen as part of a larger and presumably uniform, Serbian historical and cultural corpus. This methodological approach has characterized not only the works of many Serbian historians but can also be detected in the works of a number of western analysts of the South Slavic past. Often Montenegrins have been perceived as a rather exotic but useful element of the Serbian ethnic and historic body of evidence. At the same time, many Serbian historians have treated the traditional cultures of other nations and ethnic groups living in Montenegro as a necessary evil, or as a benign atavism on the monolithic and healthy body of the nation. Analysis of micro history and the internal historical/social/economic/cultural dynamics in the region have never constituted the main focus of their scholarly attention.

The second category is framed by the Serbian national mythology through which this constructed historical narrative has been represented and rationalized. If we apply the analytical tools of mnemohistory, as presented by Jan Assmann, to this case, it can be said that the historical reality of relations between Montenegro and Serbia was reduced to a figure of memory. This collapsing of historical reality manifested itself in the form of a ›Grand Narrative‹: the myth of Montenegro as the *pinnacle of Eastern Orthodoxy*; Montenegrins as *the best of all Serbs*, and the capital Cetinje as *Little Zion*.¹¹ Montenegrins were portrayed in the same manner: as *the best of all Serbs*. The history of Montenegro is often presented as the history of a remote army camp, whose swordsmen were guarding for posterity the spirit of the *Eastern Orthodox faith* and protecting it from falling under the cold shadow of the *Crescent*. The insistence upon the religious aspect in such interpretations and the validity of the entire argument is contestable, since Montenegrins have always displayed an unusual attitude towards religion and the Church institutions:

No matter how much a Montenegrin may love his church, he does not like to attend the service, and lately the church and state authorities are making an effort to ensure that church services are attended regularly. In earlier times there were those who never entered a church as long as they lived. [...] In his absentmindedness, a Montenegrin enters the church with his cap on his head. I had an opportunity to see older priests do the same thing. [...] This is why the religious beliefs of Montenegrins, regardless of how



12 Rovinsky, Pavel Apolonovich: *Etnografija Crne Gore*. Vol. I, transl. fr. Russ. by Vuk Minić. Podgorica: CID 1998, p. 282f. [Orig. publ.: St. Petersburg 1897].

13 Tadić, Ljubomir: Member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU). *Glas Javnosti*. Beograd, Februar 10-11, 2001. Also cf. Vlahović 2000 and Simić 1997, pp. 122-124.

14 Assmann 1997, p. 14.

15 Many leaders of the *Montenegrin Federalist Movement*, who were the most ardent advocates of an independent Montenegro during the late 19th and early 20th century, publicly declared themselves as »the best of Serbs«.

deep they may be, are either not expressed openly through rituals or are displayed in a very simple and sometimes even crude manner.¹² [Transl. by SP]

Many Serbo-Croatian history books imply that the Montenegrin state was never a real state but represented only a historical sentiment (heavily coloured by the oral tradition); it was a historical aberration that survived within the specific conditions of permanent armed struggle against the Ottoman invader. Those who ascribe to such a view argue that once the Ottoman state dissolved, there was no reason for a Montenegrin state to exist outside all-inclusive Serbian national and political frameworks. Following the same argument, some contemporary analysts of the South Slavic geopolitical landscape interpret the disappearance of the Montenegrin state after the first World War as the glorious fulfillment of its people's centuries-old desire:

Montenegro had its own state before Serbia did, but Montenegro has always been a Serbian state – even under Njegoš and the Petrović dynasty. Bavaria, for example, was once the kingdom and now is called the Free Bavarian State, but no one dreams of turning it into an independent state, let alone of denying it its German national identity.¹³

Within such a political and ideological equation, the independent Montenegrin state made sense only as long as it carried forward the torch of an undying spirit of Serbhood. The reference to Montenegrins as *the best of all Serbs* (still forcefully advocated by the exponents of Serbian expansionist nationalism) is an example of how the ethnic factor is simplified and isolated, as well as hypertrophied, in an attempt to prove the ethnic purity of Montenegrin identity. This is, I believe, the deepest epistemological, ideological and political meaning of the thesis about Montenegrins being *racially pure* or even being *the purest of Serbs*. The problem of the dual character of Montenegrin identity has been, in most cases, interpreted as the relation between the sub-ordained concept of »Montenegrin«, representing the notion of territoriality, and the super-ordained concept of »Serb«, representing the ethnic/national belonging. Thus, Montenegrins have been perceived as ethnic Serbs living in the geographic region known as Montenegro. I believe that such a view represents a gross simplification of the issue of *Montenegrin Serbhood*.

I would argue that the concept of »*Montenegrin Serbhood*« represents the manifestation of Montenegrin ecclesiastical consciousness in its engaged version. Montenegrins preserved the notion of their distinctiveness in regard to other South Slavic groups and continuously reaffirmed it through history. Finally, they understood the idea of *Serbhood* to be the attribute of their belonging to Eastern Orthodox Faith and to Christianity in general, as well as to the larger South Slavic context. Based on such understanding, Montenegrins incorporated this idea in the building blocks of their national individuality. The result of such incorporation is the historical precedent of the notion of *Montenegrin Serbhood*, which differs from the notion of *Serbhood* anywhere else in the Balkans, as well as from this notion among the ethnic Serbs in Serbia proper. Because it was understood as the ideology of »constant struggle«, this *Montenegrin Serbhood* did not stand in opposition to a distinct character of Montenegrin national identity. It was used as a tool of pragmatic politics in order to achieve the final goal. Montenegrins used the terms »*Serbs*« and »*Serbhood*« whenever they referred to South Slavic elements rallied in an anti-Ottoman coalition and around the Christian Cross. Moreover, it is true that the identity construction is a long process of historical/cultural sedimentation and that the final product is perceived as a relatively long-lasting and stable phenomenon. However, it would be a mistake to regard such a phenomenon as static or unchangeable. Identity is a dynamic phenomenon whose manifestations can vary over time and even more so if such an identity is positioned on the periphery of a dominant cultural/political force.

If »we are what we remember«, the truth of memory lies in the identity that it shapes. This truth is subject to time so that it changes with every new identity and every new present. It lies in the story, not as it happened but as it lives on and unfolds in collective memory.¹⁴

With this in mind, it seems rather wrong to contest/deny contemporary expressions of the national identity of Montenegrins and their distinctiveness in regard to Serbs, by invoking the facts that a century or so ago many Montenegrins (some rulers from the Petrović dynasty included) declared themselves to be Serbs.¹⁵ The fact that each of us constructs and reconstructs one's own identity, and lives a »private narrative« should be recognized as the process of gradual change over time and as the process whose manifestations can not be mummified within the strict



16 For interesting analyses of this issue cf. Babović, Senka: *Kulturna Politika u Zetskoj Banovini*. Podgorica: Univ. of Montenegro [Diss.] 1997; also cf. Nikčević, Vojislav: *O Postanku Etonima Dukljani, Zečani, Crnogorci*. Podgorica 1987; *Crnogorski Jezik*. Cetinje 1993 and also *Pravopis Crnogorskog Jezika*. Podgorica: Montenegrin PEN Center 1997, as well as Zivković, Dragoje: *Istorija Crnogorskog Naroda*. Cetinje 1989 and Radojević, Danilo: *Etničke Odrednice Jezika – Naziv Nije Neutran*. In: *Vjesnik*, no. 14999 (Zagreb 1989) and Rastoder, Šerbo: *Skrivana Strana Istorije: Crnogorska Buna i Odmetnički Pokret 1918-1929*. Dokumenti. Vols. 1-4. Bar: Nidamentym Montenegro 1997.

17 The Ottoman conquest of Serbia was completed in 1459.

18 This thesis was argued by many unionists and contemporaries of the unification in 1918, such as Spasojević, Janko: *Crna Gora i Srbija*. Informativna Služba Ministarstva Inostranih Dela: Pariz 1919; Šaulić, Novica: *Crna Gora*. Beograd 1942; Tomić, Svetozar: *Desetogodišnjica Ujedinjenja Srbije i Crne Gore*. Beograd 1929; Četković, Jovan: *Ujedinjenje Crne Gore i Srbije*. Dubrovnik 1940. For an overview of historiography on the subject cf. Pavlović, Srdja: *The Podgorica Assembly in 1918: Notes on the Yugoslav Historiography (1919-1970) about the Unification of Montenegro and Serbia*. In: *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. Vol. XLI, no. 2 (June 1999), pp. 157-176.

19 Ash, Timothy Garton: *The Last Revolution*. In: *The New York Rev. of Books*, 16/11/2000. Cf. also Terzić, Slavenko: *Ideološki Koreni Crnogorske Nacije i Crnogorskog Separatizma*. In: *Beograd*, 21/09/2000. *Serb Land of Montenegro Web Site*: <http://www.njegos.org/idkor.html>.

20 Jelavich, Barbara: *History of the Balkans: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1983, p. 252.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

limitations of the nineteenth century conceptual framework of national awakening. At present, a plurality of Montenegrin population constructs and lives a ›narrative‹ (on an individual level and on the level of a collective experience) that is somewhat different from this earlier model. I also believe that it is wrong to defend Montenegrin identity and its distinctiveness by vehemently negating these facts, while seeking to establish a nonexistent absolute continuity with the early inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula or with early state formations in the region. Both strategies indicate that their advocates are still wrestling with the significance of national identity and both are based upon seemingly different myths: the one about *purity*, the other about *temporal/historical continuity* with medieval state formations. What envelops this dual character of Montenegrin identity and impedes a more complete understanding of Montenegrin history is, among other things, its tradition of epic poetry, the contents of which are open to various and often conflicting interpretations, and represent valuable material for mythmaking. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, Montenegrin epic poetry is the stuff other's dreams are made of.

Having in mind the distinct character of Montenegro's traditional culture and the specificities of its historical, political and economic, as well as cultural development, one is intrigued by the persistent appropriation of Montenegrins by the Serbs and wonders about the reasons for this claim of ownership. Considering the findings presented in recent scholarly literature in Montenegro that support the claim about Montenegrin distinctiveness, the assumed ethnic closeness of these two nations appears to be a politically motivated argument.¹⁶ One could analyse the inclusion of Montenegrins in the Serbian national mythos as a way to establish and preserve the historical/temporal, and cultural continuity of the Serbian nation throughout the centuries of the Ottoman rule in the region.

For some 400 years or so (from about 1450 to the late 1800s)¹⁷ Serbia proper was ruled by the Ottomans. All aspects of life in the region were subject to regulations and laws imposed by the invader, and the prerogatives of the Serbian ethnic and national, cultural and religious being were suppressed. On the other hand, during the same period Montenegro existed as a relatively independent political entity that displayed a measurable temporal continuity of its own ethnic, historical and cultural being. With the advent of the ideology of national homogenisation among the Serbs it became necessary to establish a Serbian historical and cultural continuity in the area that was disrupted by the Ottomans. One of the ways to accomplish this task was the appropriation of Montenegro. This appropriation happened on many levels and included the positioning of Montenegrins within the Serbian mythos as a symbol of the undying spirit of Serbhood. Only then was the Serbian historical narrative able to bridge the gap of some four centuries during the Ottoman rule and establish the temporal continuity needed for the process of national awakening.

At present, the differences among those opposed to Montenegro's independence and sovereignty have to do with the modalities for rationalizing and justifying the inclusion of Montenegro and its population into the Serbian ethnic and political, as well as economic and cultural corpus. They attempt to contextualize their arguments by positioning the idea of an independent and sovereign Montenegro within the two broad categories. First, the unionists place it within the realm of the old dynastic aspirations of the last Montenegrin King, Nikola I Petrović.¹⁸ Second, the idea of an independent and sovereign Montenegro is viewed as an ideological construction of the communist regime. The former President of FR Yugoslavia Dobrica Ćosić stated in a recent conversation with Timothy Garton Ash, that »Montenegritness« (Montenegritinity?) was the invention of the Stalinist national policy.¹⁹

On the other side of the political division, advocates of Montenegrin independence (*independentists*) repeatedly invoked the alleged continuity of statehood from the time of the medieval Balšić and Vojislavljević dynasties. The fact that a Montenegrin political entity emerged in 1386 and survived until 1421 and as well as the fact that from 1516 to 1852 Montenegro was a theocratic state ruled by a prince-bishop, constitutes the ultimate example of the continuity of statehood in the eyes of those favouring independence.²⁰ They often point out that by the time a Serbian state began to emerge during the 1800s, the Montenegrin state had known over 400 years of separate existence. Under the sixty-year rule of Prince (from 1910, King) Nikola I Petrović, Montenegro extended its territory and enjoyed the diplomatic recognition, and sometimes the close attention, of the European powers. Montenegro's admittedly minor role in European politics was enhanced by the success of the king in marrying his daughters into various European royal families.²¹



22 Montenegro: In The shadow of the Volcano. International Crisis Group (ICG). Balkans Report No 89. Podgorica, Washington, Brussels, March 21, 2000, p. 11, qtd. in: Gallagher, Tom: Identity in Flux, Destination Uncertain: Montenegro During the Yugoslav Wars. [unpubl.], qtd. with the author's permission.

23 The Faculty of Economics from Podgorica (Montenegro) and the Institute for Social Sciences from Ljubljana (Slovenia) conducted this survey in 20 municipalities in Montenegro (Montenegro has 21 municipalities), with the exception of the municipality of Plužine in northern Montenegro. The survey was conducted between the 19th and 31st January 2001. In: Vijesti. Podgorica, 19/02/2001.

24 22 April Parlamentarni Izbori. Ključni Zaključci. Podgorica: Nacionalni Demokratski Institut za Međunarodne Odnose (NDI) 2001. – The NDI conducted this opinion pool between the 15th and 19th March 2001 in all 21 municipalities of Montenegro. The total of 1 265 individuals, aged from 18 to 70, were screened. The margin of error for 1 200 interviewees was +/-3%. It is interesting to note that the majority of those in favour of independence was aged between 18 and 30 and was mostly students. Also, almost all of the interviewees preferring independence defined themselves as either Montenegrins or Albanians, or Muslims.

25 Even though Article No. 3 of the *Belgrade Agreement* allows the possibility of a referendum it seems unlikely that such an act will take place in Montenegro in 2005. However, the leaders of the DPS and signatories of the *Agreement* (the President Djukanović and the Prime Minister Vujanović) were quick to reassure the general public that the referendum is not forgotten, but that it would take place under less hostile political conditions and if »we come to the conclusion that such a move would best serve the interests of Montenegro's citizens«. – Cf. Tadić-Mijović/ Djuranović 2002.

These contesting concepts and the emotionally charged rhetoric of their modern time advocates managed to polarize (politically and ideologically) the population of Montenegro. Regardless of what the available statistical data might suggest, the fact remains that the people of Montenegro are bitterly divided over the issue of Montenegro's independence and the referendum as an acceptable modus of achieving it. A poll carried out in December 1999 found that 36,1% of the people support independence, 28% strong federal ties with Serbia, 22,5% support the government's 1999 call for a loose confederation and 5,5% the unity with Serbia.²² Results of the opinion pool carried out by the *Faculty of Economics* (Podgorica) and the *Institute for Social Sciences* (Ljubljana) in January 2001 showed that some 58,4% support independence, while some 25,6% were against it. With regards to the referendum as the most viable way of determining the future status of Montenegro, 82,4% were in favour of pursuing the plebiscite, while 6,4% were against it.²³ Furthermore, the most recent opinion pool suggests that some 61,6% support independence. There are indications that after the signing of the *Belgrade Agreement* in March 2002 this ratio has changed in favour of a unitary state.²⁴

The blame for the ferocity and depth of the current political and ideological division in Montenegro could be equally distributed amongst the advocates of both of the contesting political concepts. Those favouring a unitary state resort to the political tactic of emphasising the ethnic connection (sameness) between Montenegrins and Serbs and rely on representations of the mythologized past as the theatrical background for achieving the goals of their political programs. Their opponents, the *independentists*, could be criticised for eagerly accepting the challenge and engaging in the futile debate about ethnicity. Judging by the frequency and ferocity of such debates in Montenegro, it could be said that the *unitarists* have achieved their primary objectives. First, they managed to shift the focus of public attention from the crucial issues of responsibility for the political failures during the last decade and of the need for determining ways of overcoming the dark legacy of yesteryears to a seemingly endless discussion about the ethnic origins of Montenegrins. Secondly, and in my view even more important, they succeeded in marginalizing the discourse of finding the mechanisms and modalities for the establishment of a civic society in Montenegro. These might be some of the reasons why a significant percentage of the population in Montenegro is not sure about the nature of the earlier promised referendum on independence.²⁵ Many wonder if the referendum would represent an attempt to sever all links with Serbia and establish a legal framework that would restrict or deny any expression of attachment (on a personal and collective level) to Serbian ethnos, culture and tradition. Many also think that such political acrobatics are aimed at strengthening the elite's grip on power in Montenegro. Whatever the case might be, today the political arena in Montenegro is characterized by the harmfully high emotional outbursts which obscure the real issue: the modern condition (political and social, economic and cultural) that calls for an introduction of a new discourse to assess and present the idea of Montenegrin independence and sovereignty. This is the discourse of civic society.

Even though the process of redefining the existing relationship between Montenegro and Serbia is manifestly political, it should not be forgotten that politics is only one of many mechanisms through which such a process is expressed. Not to confuse the reader, I should say that I see the cooperation between Montenegro and Serbia as a fact of life regardless of the final outcome of the current debate. The existence of an independent, sovereign and internationally recognised Montenegro, or the survival of FR Yugoslavia as a confederation of independent states, or the adoption of some third model of cooperation, will not lessen Montenegro's interest in maintaining some level of bilateral contact with its northern neighbour.

Having in mind the history of the two countries' political, economic and cultural relations, as well as the needs and limitations of their internal development, and the ideological frameworks of the current confrontation (the manifestly expansionist policy of the ruling elite in Serbia towards Montenegro), it seems almost impossible to reach a compromise that will satisfy both parties. Political realities in Montenegro and Serbia and the multi-layered character of their relations clearly show the existence of two diametrically opposed concepts of cooperation and co-existence. These concepts are not the creations of contemporary politics. They are the products of the late 19th century national awakening movements and a national disequilibrium among the South Slavs. The fact of their historical continuity – *two solitudes that live parallel lives and meet each other only to confront each other, but never reach the point of mutual understanding* – gives us strong indications of an inadequacy and unsustainability (not to speak of the absence of democratic nature and equality) of a federal model of governance in the region. The collapse of the



26 Cf. Gow, James: *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War*. Columbia: Columbia UP 1997; Woodward, Susan: *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War*. Washington DC: Brookings Inst. 1995; Hastings, Adrian: *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. New York: Cambridge UP 1997; Seton-Watson, Hugh: *Nationalism – Old and New*. Sydney: Sydney UP 1965; Russinov, Denison: *Nationalities Policy and the National Question*. In: Ramet, Pedro (Ed.): *Yugoslavia in the 1980s*. Boulder/Col.: Westview Pr. 1985; Pavlović, Srdja: *Understanding Balkan Nationalism: Wrong People, in the Wrong Place, at the Wrong Time*. In: *South East European Politics*. Vol. 1, iss. 2, Dec. 2000. Budapest: Central European Univ., <http://www.seep.ceu.hu>; Verdery, Katherine: *The Political Life of Dead Bodies: Reburial and the Postcolonialist Change*. New York: Columbia UP 1998.

27 Debeljak, Ales: *Varieties of National Experience: Resistance and Accommodation in Contemporary Slovenian Identity*. In: *Spaces of Identity*. Vol. 1, iss. 1, Jan. 2001, <http://www.spacesofidentity.net>.

28 Ibid.

29 The first political party in Montenegro was established in 1903.

former *Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (SFRY) and the dissolution of the construction known as *Yugoslav supranationality* are only the most recent and most brutal reminders of these inadequacies.²⁶

During the past few years the structure of power in Montenegro defined the need to re-establish Montenegro's independence and sovereignty, and outlined the government's vision of Montenegro's future according to various party programs and with different levels of emotional involvement of the participants. Despite the fact that the effort towards reaching the optimal solution for Montenegro – its independence and sovereignty – deserves support and respect, I would argue that a shift of focus is necessary. The domestic political scene is very important indeed, but it is not the only field of Marathon on which the future of Montenegro will be decided. There are many fields like that in Montenegro and culture is one of them. Having in mind the current state of affairs in Montenegrin culture and the marginal role culture has been given, it is not advisable to speculate on whose messenger will deliver the good news with his last breath. Culture is the stage where the defeats and victories of any political concept will be measured. Besides, we live in a time that is shaped by the processes of economic globalisation and regional cooperation, and culture remains the only sphere where it is still possible to preserve some of the features of specific national experiences of numerous nations and ethnic groups in Montenegro.²⁷ The reality in Montenegro offers us plenty of examples of the marginalization and dissolution of these national experiences.

To say that the priority should be given to resolving the issues of statehood and the international recognition of Montenegro has some truth. At the same time, such a statement presupposes the primary role of politics in the process. One is tempted to remind the *independentists* of the fact that the process of political and economic revitalisation of any country, while important, should not be divorced from the process of defining and re-defining cultural heritage and contemporary manifestations of it. Representative elements of any nation, such as its *independence* and sovereignty, and international recognition are primarily based on a clearly defined cultural identity of the nation's members.

The solution to the current political and ideological stalemate between Montenegro and Serbia depends on the dynamics of political processes on a domestic, as well as international scene, and on strengthening the local economy. However, it should be kept in mind that such stately prerogatives cannot be achieved solely through the formation of short-term political alliances or by the rhetoric of a desired inclusion in the so-called European and transatlantic integrative processes. What is being sidelined is the role that culture plays in this process. Montenegro's writers, artists, musicians and actors contribute through their artistic endeavours to finding an optimal solution to the current crisis much more than they are given credit for.²⁸ Activities of the *Montenegrin P.E.N. Centre* and the importance of continuous work on the *Montenegrin Encyclopaedia*, as well as the contribution of scholarly journals such as *Almanah* and *Matica*, the magazines *Gest* and *Mobil Art*, and the publishing activities of CID and *Conteco* – to mention just a few – have a greater long-term impact on the process of cultural identification and self-identification than all the exported aluminium and tourist attractions in Montenegro put together. The same could be said for the role played by the Montenegrin independent media such as *Monitor*, *Vijesti* and *Montena Independent Television*.

Even though it is necessary to build a political force that can materialise the popular sentiment, thus fulfilling the mandate given to it by the electorate body, one should be reminded of the fact that the idea of an independent and sovereign Montenegro is not the brainchild of any contemporary political party. At present, and in spite of the efforts by the ruling elite to convince us otherwise, this idea represents a popular sentiment that has its own history and its own stages of development, and it should be brought to fruition in accordance with the model of contemporary political thought and practice. As the events following the signing of a *Belgrade Agreement* on March 14, 2002 indicate, this personalizing of the idea of such scope is nothing more than a short-term solution within the concept of pragmatic daily politics. Negative effects of such an attitude (embraced both by the political position and the political opposition in Montenegro, albeit for different reasons) of the elite means taking the agency away from the people of Montenegro and excluding them from the process altogether. Moreover, such an approach positions the contemporary elite in power as initiators and an advocates of an idea that was, in spite of numerous setbacks and modifications through time, in existence long before the establishment of any political party in Montenegro.²⁹



30 Mićunović, Dragoljub in: Delo. Ljubljana, 13/02/2001.

31 Telling examples of such a political tactic are recent statements by an official of the federal government and by one of the most prominent Serbian intellectuals. »The idea of the secession of Montenegro is the problem of the local elite and does not represent interests of its citizens«. The statement of the Prime Minister of FR Yugoslavia, Zoran Žižić, during a recent meeting with the representatives of the *British House of Commons*. In: PCNEN. Bilten. Podgorica, 08/02/2001, <http://www.pcnen.cg.yu>. »Behind all the events unfolding in Montenegro is the idea of power grabbing. If Djukanović does not wish to follow the policies of Njegoš and Nikola, who always thought of themselves as Serbian dynasty, he is then in favour of the policy of the late Guvernadures Radonjićs who were the enemies and rivals of Petrović dynasty«. Ljubomir Tadić, the member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU). In: Glas Javnosti. Beograd, Februar 10-11, 2001). Petar Petrović II Njegoš and Nikola I Petrović were both members of the Montenegrin ruling dynasty. Nikola was the first king of Montenegro (crowned in 1910) and the last ruler of independent and sovereign Montenegro. *Guvernadur (Governator/Governor)* was a civil administrator in Montenegro. Traditionally, this title had stayed within one family – in this case the Radonjić family. The Radonjićs have always expressed more inclinations to cooperate with Venice and later with Austria than with Russia and Serbia.

32 During his press conference on March 15, 2002 the Montenegrin president Djukanović tried to rationalize the signing of the *Belgrade Agreement* by describing the so-called independentist political block in Montenegro as weak and disunited, thus incapable of materializing the dream of an independent Montenegro. On the other hand, he portrayed himself and his political party as the only force capable of achieving this goal.

The *unitarists* often resort to the tactical manoeuvre of personalization trying to minimise the importance of the *independentist* agenda, by equalling a broad concept such as Montenegrin independence and sovereignty with the charisma, personal political preferences and projects of its current president. Such a view was echoed in a recent interview with Dragoljub Mićunović, the President of the *Yugoslav Lower House of Parliament*, who said that

it is obvious that we are talking about certain personal projects that at present could not rely on the support of the Serbian public opinion. Most probably such projects could not count on the majority support in Montenegro either.³⁰ [Transl. SP]

By resorting to such a political construct, the *unitarists* are attempting to sideline the significant popularity that this idea enjoys among the Montenegrin population and to interpret its manifestations not as a popular movement but as political radicalism (separatism) of a small and power-hungry elite.³¹ The result of this tactic is the constant portrayal of individual politicians in Montenegro as embodiments of the idea of Montenegrin independence. By focusing their attacks on an individual politician, the *unitarists* hope to force change within the governmental structure. Such change will (we are told) bring an end to the discussion about independence and separation. What escapes their attention is the fact that a change of personnel has little to do with *unionist's* desired change of a popular sentiment, since the *independentist* political agenda seems to enjoy rather wide public support in Montenegro. It is interesting to note that the ruling elite and the Montenegrin president himself recently resorted to a similar rhetoric in ensuring their stay in power.³² This point of contact between the political position (DPS) and the opposition parties in Montenegro speaks volumes about the nature of the system and the prevailing ideological concepts.

Some *independentists* (though a small minority) would point out that what we see in Montenegro is not the final stage of the process of forming and defining national identity of Montenegrins according to the late nineteenth-century model, but the need for protecting and re-emphasising a long-existing and well-rounded notion of identity in a new environment. One could easily agree with such a general statement. Indeed, it is necessary to seek modalities of expressing and manoeuvring space to accommodate the different national and cultural identities in present-day Montenegro. The special features of these identities in Montenegro make this process even more important. When assessing the content of cultural concepts in the republics of the former Yugoslavia and their internal dynamics, one could broadly characterize them as particular types of *multiculturalism*. Such a categorisation could be applied to all regions of the former Yugoslavia, with the possible exception of Montenegro. Multiculturalism presupposes the parallel existence of two or more different cultural frameworks within one region, but does not include the process of interaction. I would suggest that we should recognise a different process in Montenegro. This is the process of *interculturalism* that is represented by and expressed through constant interaction between various cultural concepts. The historical, political and cultural matrix of Montenegro is the result of interactions and multi-layered borrowings that were and still are among the central features of Montenegrin society. This is the micro history of internal dynamics of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations. What sets Montenegro apart from other republics of the former Yugoslavia is the presence and visibility of various cultural patterns upon which its tradition and history grew and developed, as well as the existence of space provided for the expression of the differences. Problems arise when one starts seeking practical ways to revitalize the values of the Montenegrin national and cultural identity. At that point the *independentists* often resort to canonizing the constitutive elements (real or imagined) of such identity. Their approach is rather similar to the one that characterized nineteenth-century national awakening movements. Despite of covering it with the blanket of postmodernist rhetoric (as it is the case in present-day Montenegro) it still mirrors the same old model. Insisting on the rhetoric of *Montenegrin identity* and *Montenegrin culture*, as well as *Montenegrin ethnic framework*, could be misunderstood by many as a distancing from a stereotypical *other*, or as an initial phase in the political process of creating and marginalizing the *second class citizens* in Montenegro. Current political, economic and cultural conditions create the need to strengthen the Montenegrin identity but also demand its constant re-evaluation and seeking of ways for its co-existence with identities of those who are not ethnically Montenegrin, or those who construct their identity within a different ethnic and national framework. It allows emphasis on one's identity but also initiates the process of rethinking its basic premises and negotiating its position of one



33 Musil, Robert: *The Man Without Qualities*. Vol.1. New York: First Vintage Intern. Ed. 1996, p. 461.

34 Debeljak 2001.

35 Anselmi, William/ Gouliamos, Kosta: *Elusive Margins: Consuming Media, Ethnicity and Culture*. Toronto, Buffalo, Lancaster: Guernica 1998, p. 15.

among equals. To achieve this it is necessary to introduce a new discourse based on the category of abstract citizen of Montenegro, regardless of his/her ethnic and national identity and religious provenience or political affiliation.

In the case of Montenegro, one could follow the gradual separation between the *content* (cultural identities and cultural politics) and the *form* (political rhetoric of cohabitation, multiculturalism and cooperation in the region), with the *content* being constantly marginalized. The lack of attention to the *content* and overlooking of the relations of causality between the cultural identity of a nation and its stately attributes usually results in a questioning of both the identity and the viability of the state formation. Regardless of what might really be the case in Montenegro, the negative effects of the so-called »active waiting« on the part of those in power constitute the image of confusion and insecurity, as well as that of frailty and lack of clear vision of Montenegro's future. Nevertheless, sovereign and internationally recognised Montenegro is a honourable idea that deserves respect and support. However, it cannot be achieved, nor can it survive as an acceptable *modus vivendi* for all its citizens without prior redefinition, qualitative assessment and a strengthening of its cultural cornerstones. Having this in mind, it seems necessary to put more effort into redefining the cultural politics in Montenegro. This could be the best way to overcome potent and persistent outside influences and establish a successful two-way communication with the neighbours. Such interaction and creative dialogue with the manifestations of different mentalities and perceptions of life is the only *modus* acceptable for Montenegro.

Transparency of the concept of cultural politics is based on a clearly delineated notion of identity, whose elements cannot be easily deconstructed in the process of cultural exchange. Even though one can at once recognise the specificity of national and cultural identity of Montenegrins, emphasising this specificity seems necessary. Naturally, the crucial aspect of the whole process is to find a good measure of things and to establish a necessary balance. Otherwise, one enters the realm of provincial xenophobia and ethnic exclusivism. Montenegrins should be conscious of the fact that their cultural heritage and its contemporary manifestations are also the product of a creative effort of individual intellectuals and groups that could not be positioned within the Montenegrin ethnic framework. Cultural borrowings are a common occurrence in many cultures and there is nothing wrong with it as long as the purpose of such borrowings is to modify them and learn about others, rather than to simply adopt or create a carbon copy of the outside model. The ability to accept outside influences and filter them through the mechanisms of one's own artistic and creative sensibility is a sign of a well rounded sense of identity and represents a qualitative departure from the rigid *limes* of one's ethnic mental landscape. An insistence on prioritising and canonizing ethnic criterion inevitably produces a backlash since it is known that *others* (outsiders) are perceived as foreign, unwanted, dehumanised and finally, when representatives of a particular national corpus feel insecure about their own identity, as enemies. As Robert Musil pointed out, the ethnic biases are usually nothing more than manifestations of one's self-hatred and the products of an inner conflict that is projected on a convenient victim.³³

Creative interaction between two or more different segments of broader/different cultural frameworks could be best achieved if concepts of *ethnic* identities are separated from that of *civic* identity. This separation should occur on the level of semantics as well as of political and cultural activity. Such differentiation must be initiated and maintained on the level of public discourse in the Montenegrin nation state and must carry in itself the possibility and the right of an individual or a group to chose their own civic identity, while not severing all ties with the original ethnic group.³⁴ Despite the rhetoric it is obvious that a suitable climate for accepting and implementing this differentiation in Montenegro is almost non-existent and that the notion of a Montenegrin nation state is conditioned by the ethnic principle rather than by that of the civic identity of its population. This kind of exclusivism and forced retraction to the *absolutism of the pure* can only produce cultural isolation that feeds itself on the remnants of ethnic mimicry and rejects everything that does not come from within one's ethnic circle. Instead of representing itself as a living and mobile experience, it is reduced to static self-representation. In the absence of a political agency that is able and ready to establish the mechanisms of a democratic civic state detached from the restrictive concept of a mythologized past, cultural identities and self-representations become imposed and internalized.³⁵ Imposed processes and representations – the construction of stereotypes – could turn into mechanisms for controlling numerically smaller ethno-cultural groups (or could be perceived as such). This is the point when the problem



36 Debeljak 2001.

37 The surface area of Montenegro is 5,333 square miles (13,812 km²) with the population of about 617,000. The ethnic structure of Montenegro is as follows: 61,7% Montenegrins; 14,5% Muslims; 9,3% Serbs; 6,5% Albanians, and 8% Others. In addition, there are some 140,000 Montenegrins living in Serbia. (*Yugoslav Census*, Belgrade 1991). The wars in Croatia and Bosnia (1992-1995), as well as the latest conflict in Kosovo, resulted in a substantial influx of refugees from those areas into Montenegro. In 1993 alone, the number of refugees in Montenegro reached 10% of its entire population. The Kosovo conflict only worsened that ratio.

changes its character and becomes political. Many people in Montenegro perceive the referendum on independence as an imposition and a forced declaration of individual's notion of ethnic identity, instead of a way to create an optimal legal framework for the process of defining civic identity in Montenegro. It is necessary to explain to the electorate body that the *modus vivendi* called independent, sovereign and internationally recognised Montenegro is needed in order »to help us be, and not to simply have«. ³⁶ Successfully accomplishing this task will defeat the unitarist argument about Montenegrin independence as a process which will produce so-called *losers* and *second-class citizens* and position such argument at an appropriate shelf in the *National Museum of Ethnic Constructions*.

Advocates of an ethnically based Montenegrin state forget that such a concept is a thing of the past and that it cannot function in the contemporary socio-political, economic and demographic framework, except as a dictatorship. Such a concept, among other things, draws its strength from numbers. The history of relations between Montenegro and Serbia provides many instances when the numerical advantage/disadvantage is used to deny the right of Montenegrins to call themselves a nation. ³⁷ Exponents of a Serbian expansionist nationalism interpret the expressed need for an independent and sovereign Montenegro through the distortive lens of epic rhetoric about barbarians at the gate and enemies who intend to destroy the innocence of their ethnically pure and compact Garden of Eden. That is why every descent into the field of civic political and cultural orientation in Montenegro has been perceived by unitarists as an activity of the *Independentist Fifth Column*, one aimed at abandoning and betraying the *sacred national (ethnic) attributes* or as an *empty rhetoric of mondialism* whose advocates *detached themselves from the essence of our everyday existence* long ago. Considering these qualifications and their ideological and political base, it would be unwise to favour an ethnic model for the recreation of a Montenegrin independent state. Avoiding such a trap presupposes a clear definition of the civic national state and an affirmation of civic identity in Montenegro.

The prioritisation of culture and cultural politics in the process of creating the conditions that will nourish elements of civic identity in Montenegro and establishing mechanisms through which a civic state could function is also important in view of the relatively recent political/personnel changes in Serbia. Even though these changes are mainly of a representational character, they could be seen as an improvement. Namely, deposing the dictator lessens the chances of Montenegro of being pacified through military action but does not entirely remove the threat. Once again, we are going back to the issue of modalities for achieving a political goal. The uniform cultural model that is being imposed upon Montenegro replaces earlier manifestations of an aggressive Serbian westward and southward aimed expansionism. In the context of a post-modern model of domination, the pen has become more effective and dangerous than the rifle. Overcoming such challenges presupposes a restructuring of Montenegro's economy and the reform of its political system. But such a process must include the revitalisation of the contemporary and multi-layered corpus of cultural activities in Montenegro, as well as the preservation of its traditional cultural values.

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