Elite Interests and the Serbian-Montenegrin Conflict

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ABSTRACT

In ethnic conflicts, the behaviour of political elites constitutes an important variable, both in the outbreak of conflict and in attempts to find solutions. Insisting on the importance of elites does not imply, however, that elite interests are the only driving force: the elites operate in structures of constraints and opportunities. In this article, the conflict between Serbia and Montenegro is analyzed. The conflict began as a conflict over political and economic reforms, but during the course of the conflict it has acquired different characteristics. In this process, ethnicity has come to play a more important role. These developments are partly due to intentional elite behaviour, but the process of dissociation has also acquired its own momentum which constrains the elites. The article argues that elite interests, interplay between the elites in Belgrade and Podgorica as well as intra-'ethnic' dynamics have been crucial for the development of the conflict.

Introduction

In the fortunate cases when regulation of national and ethnic conflicts is successful, the first stages of such success are usually represented by television footage of men in dark suits solemnly signing agreements vowing to put the conflict behind them. The role of elites in such an event is crucial; they are the ones signing the agreement and the ones with the authority to, attempt to, implement it. These same elites may, however, not only be agents of peace they may very well have played an important role in causing the conflict and in its further development. Conflicts can serve elite interests in a number of ways, but even if they were to begin with the product of elites pursuing their interests these elites may later on find themselves constrained by the followers they have mobilised and by hardliners breathing down their neck. In order to analyse the

development of ethnic conflicts, one should therefore not only analyse relations between ethnic groups, but also dynamics within ethnic groups.

In this article, the conflict between Serbia and Montenegro will be analysed with a specific focus on the role played by elites. Compared to the other conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the conflict between Serbia and Montenegro has taken on a rather different character. Most notably it has not turned into a violent conflict and this may in some part be influenced by a second distinguishing factor: the ethnic division between Montenegrins and Serbs is less clear than the ethnic divisions in the other conflicts. It is therefore debatable whether one should characterise the conflict as an 'ethnic conflict', but I will argue below that ethnicity has come to play a more important role and elite interests and dynamics within the two republics have been crucial in this development.

Elites in Ethnic Conflicts

In his influential book *Conflict Regulation in Deeply Divided Societies*, Eric Nordlinger argued that '*Successful or unsuccessful regulation will be largely dependent on the purposeful behaviour of political elites*' (Nordlinger 1972: 4). The actions of elites are decisive for whether a conflict will continue or whether it is possible to reach some form of compromise. The elites are, however, not only important for the success or failure of conflict regulation, they may in turn have played an important role in the outbreak of conflict. As Benjamin Reilly argues, there is increasing evidence from many regions of 'elite initiated conflict' (Reilly 2001: 177). Elites cannot therefore necessarily be assumed to be more moderate than their followers (Horowitz 1985: 573-4), and their interests in the conflict are likely to shape its development. Even if conflicts were initially elite initiated this does not mean, however, that elites are unconstrained in their actions and their ability to compromise: they can be constrained by their followers, by competing elites within their own ethnic group as well as by the interplay with the elites of the opposing ethnic group(s).

Despite the importance of elite willingness and ability to accept conflict regulation it is often assumed away or merely treated as an unanalysed precondition in the literature on conflict regulation: there is a focus on institutional engineering rather than on institutional choice (Reilly and Reynolds 1999: 4-5). Theories on the timing of conflict regulation are not surprisingly mostly focused on the relations *between* the groups in the conflict. They focus on concepts such as 'ripe moment', 'mutually hurting stalemate', and 'security dilemma' (see e.g. Zartman 1995; Posen 1993). The key to bringing a conflict to end is, according to these accounts, that willingness to accept compromise is found simultaneously in both groups and this is primarily an effect of the interplay between the groups and possibly of international intervention to alleviate the security dilemma. The development of a conflict is, however, not

only influenced by the relations between groups: a stalemate can last for years and a conflict can take a different course without the relations between groups being the driving force. The dynamics *within* the ethnic groups - between the elites, their followers and competing elites - are also of importance for when elites will see an interest in pursuing an accommodating strategy, and be able to follow those inclinations. As Horowitz argues, elites in ethnic conflicts cannot be expected to be monolithic: intra-ethnic competition is the norm and this will severely constrain elites (Horowitz 1985: 574). In addition, given such competition it will under some circumstances be strategic for elites to pursue more antagonistic strategies in order to again an advantage in the intra-ethnic competition.

Therefore, insisting on the importance of elite behaviour in ethnic conflicts is not to argue for a purely voluntaristic approach. Elite positions in ethnic conflicts do not only reflect selfish interests since the elites will be constrained by other factors, and in order to analyse this we should focus on both relations *between* the groups and dynamics *within* the groups.

Conflict in Serbia-Montenegro

In the conflict between Serbia and Montenegro, elite interests and the interplay between Serbian and Montenegrin elites have been important for the development of the conflict. Elite interests have to a large extent been affected by dynamics *within* the two republics and especially elite competition in Montenegro has had a decisive impact on the course of the conflict. Since Montenegro's policy of dissociation began in 1997, the dynamics of the conflict have gradually changed and it has taken on a different character. This change has in part been caused by the deliberative actions of elites, but they have also found themselves constrained by the momentum of the conflict.

Until 1997, Montenegro was the mostly loyal junior partner of Slobodan Milošević's Serbia and the leadership of the renamed communist party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), posed no significant problems for Milošević's power ambitions. However, in 1997 Milošević's regime began to face increasing opposition and this resulted in a split in the DPS and the victory of the former Milošević-loyalist Milo Đukanović who had now decided to challenge him and embark on a reform-oriented course. The beginning dissociation was thus sparked by dissatisfaction with Milošević's policies and authoritarianism: it was a regime-split and the predominant dynamics were not ethnic. Over the years, this gradual policy of dissociation resulted in Montenegro acquiring significant attributes of statehood, but contrary to expectations, this process was not reversed with the fall of Milošević; on the contrary, polarisation was increased. In March 2002, the so-called Belgrade Agreement was signed which creates a loose federation of two states and holds out the possibility of an independence referendum in three years.

Below, I will analyse the development of the conflict and the effect of the interplay between Belgrade and Podgorica as well as dynamics within Montenegro and Serbia. The analysis will be divided into: the 1997 split, the policy of gradual dissociation, developments post-Milošević and the 2002 Agreement.

The 1997 Split

When the Former Yugoslavia started dissolving, Milošević needed to persuade Montenegro not to secede in order to legitimise his claim that the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was the successor state to the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). In the early 1990s this did not present a significant problem, since Milošević had made sure in his 'anti-bureaucratic revolution' that the republican leadership was loyal to him. The Federatiom was, however, dysfunctional from the outset and the Montenegrin Government on several occasions argued that Montenegrin interests were insufficiently protected. The two governments therefore became gradually more alienated from each other (Bieber 2003: 11), and as the consequences of war and Milošević's isolationist policies were increasingly felt in Montenegro, a split in the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists began to be evident. The primary division was, however, *not* ethnic and the anti-Milošević faction also included people who could be regarded as pro-Yugoslav or even pro-Serb (Cerović 2001a: 3). It was primarily a split within the regime over the need for reforms and co-operation with the international community, but associated with this was the less explicit disagreement over the importance of the Federation: should the Federation be supported at any cost or were Montenegrin interests more important?

During the winter of 1996-97, Milošević was faced with mass demonstrations which delegitimised his standing as a leader; he appeared weak and while Montenegrin President, Momir Bulatović, threw his weight behind Milošević, his opponents within the DPS became more vocal (Cerović 2001a: 3). In February 1997, Đukanović, who was the then Montenegrin Prime Minister, stated: '*it would be completely wrong for Slobodan Milošević to remain in any place in the political life of Yugoslavia*' (Cerović 2001a:3). In July 1997, the DPS finally split when Đukanović's faction managed to replace Bulatović as party president, and in October 1997 the two former friends Đukanović and Bulatović faced each other in the Montenegrin Presidential elections. Đukanović ran on a platform promising the voters economic and political reforms, minority rights and an end to international isolation. His election slogan implicitly acknowledged Montenegro's place in the Federation: 'Never alone, always its own' (*nika sami, uvijek svoj*) (ESI 2000: 6). But while the campaign did not centre on separation or any form of nationalism, Bulatović nevertheless seized on its anti-Milošević stand and labelled Đukanović 'anti-Yugoslav' (Cerović 2001a: 3). The race was extremely close; Bulatović won the first round with a margin of just 2,200 votes,

but in the second round the roles were reversed and Đukanović won a marginal victory. Đukanović owed his victory in large parts to his control of the media as well as the support of the democratic opposition which had decided to put their faith in the reformed apparatchik. The opposition had previously been divided over the issue of separation from Serbia, but chose to put its differences aside in order to pursue democratic reforms. In addition, the support of the Albanian and Bosniac voters proved significant, since they together constitute over 20 per cent of the Montenegrin population.

The change in policy was marked for Đukanović who had invested almost his entire political career in the regime he had now set out to bring down. Rather than accepting the campaign discourse of the true democrat fighting the incorrigible dogmatists, his reversal should more likely be explained as a realisation that Milošević's policy would ultimately be disastrous (Ivanović 1998: 2). The regime showed signs of weakening and the political elites were increasingly pressured to deliver relief from the economic hardship brought on by the war and by international sanctions (ESI 2000: 7). After the victory of the Serbian opposition in Belgrade, many thought that the days of Milošević were numbered and this perception - while underestimating Milošević's talent for holding on to power - worked as an incentive for a change in course. By taking an anti-Milosević stand, Đukanović could furthermore position himself in competition with Bulatović.

Đukanović essentially adopted a platform that part of the democratic opposition had been advocating for years, but unlike them he was in a position to secure victory: he had the power apparatus behind him and he also possessed sufficient funds for an effective campaign. The change in course did therefore not necessarily reflect a significant change in public opinion. In the initial split and in the beginning dissociation from Belgrade, elite interests were decisive: Đukanović saw this as the right time to change course due to the ever-narrowing circle of power surrounding Milošević and due to the effects his policies had had on Montenegrin society. But even though it started out as a within-regime split over the issues of reforms, the labelling by Belgrade and Bulatović of Đukanović and the increased pressure from Belgrade, which was to follow in the years after Đukanović's victory, gradually pushed the DPS closer to a separatist stance. This shift was, however, not solely forced upon the DPS by external forces but also owed something to internal dynamics in the Montenegrin party system.

Gradual Policy of Dissociation

Shortly after his inauguration in 1998, Đukanović issued a document outlining his visions for reforming the Yugoslav state. This document was entirely focused on economic and democratic reforms for all of the Yugoslav state, not merely for Montenegro: '*This country is not being threatened by Montenegrin, or any other separatism, this country is being threatened by a long-term economic and social neglect and hopelessness'*. The initiative was argued to

be '*a challenge and a warning to the state authorities that this is the last hour for them to take responsibility for their people and state*' (Đukanović 1998). The response to this warning by Đukanović's opponents in Montenegro and the regime in Belgrade was, however, continued labelling of his policies as separatist and anti-Yugoslav, and Milošević could thereby legitimise an ever increasing pressure on Montenegro (Cerović 2001a: 4).

After Đukanović's victory, the Federal Government stopped its budgetary exchanges with Montenegro and this was reciprocated by the Montenegrin Government which gradually stopped paying prescribed incomes into the Federal Budget (Centre for Liberal Democratic Studies 2000: 5). During the pre-election campaign for the 1998 early Parliamentary elections, Bulatović was appointed Yugoslav Prime Minister, and Belgrade was thereby signalling its clear preference to the Montenegrin voters. The Montenegrin Government, however, rejected his appointment and refused to work with him. After the elections, the Federal Government refused to acknowledge the newly appointed Montenegrin representatives to which the Montenegrin Government responded by denying the Federal Government as well as the Federal institutions the right to exercise any legitimate authority over Montenegrin territory (ICG 2000: 20-22). The pro-Yugoslav opposition was therefore in power in Belgrade but was without influence in Montenegro. Belgrade was openly supporting Bulatović's Serbian People's Party (SNP), the Serbian media devoted many efforts to seek to affect Montenegro opinion (OSCE 1998: 15-6), and the SNP functioned largely as a mouthpiece for Milošević's policies.[1] For Milošević the pressure on Đukanović was a convenient strategy; by labelling him a threat to the Yugoslav state he could undermine the demands for reforms and ultimately for his own resignation. Paradoxially, Milošević may therefore have seen an interest in increased separatism from Podgorica.

The pressure from Belgrade and the Montenegrin opposition was ultimately self-fulfilling: the stance of the Montenegrin government became increasingly separatist and pro-independence. In August 1999, the Montenegrin Government adopted a 'Platform' which proposed the transformation of the FRY into a loose confederation of two equal partners, and then Prime Minister Filip Vujanović stated that this is '*the level under which we will not* go' (Calhoun 2000: 79). Gradually the Montenegrin Government assumed responsibilities that according to the FRY Constitution were set under the jurisdiction of the Federal state. The Government argued that this was a necessary step '*in order to protect the economic and overall interests of the country and its citizens*' since the Federation was '*openly or covertly, pursuing the agenda of Milošević's antidemocratic rule*' (Đukanović 1999: 36). In this context, however, the country whose interests had to be protected was Montenegro rather than Yugoslavia.

The most decisive break with Milošević's policies came when Montenegro declared neutrality during the war in Kosovo. This further fostered allegations of 'treason' from Belgrade and intensified the propaganda war between Belgrade and Podgorica (Cerović 2001a: 5). After the war ended, the policy of dissociation continued: In the autumn of 1999, the Montenegrin

Government declared fiscal sovereignty and took over both customhouses in Montenegro and introduced the Deutche Mark on equal footing with the Yugoslav dinar; later the D-Mark became the only legal tender in Montenegro (Centre for Liberal Democratic Studies, 2000: 5).[2] On the Belgrade side, a trade blockade was imposed against Montenegro in early 2000, and in July 2000, the Federal Parliament adopted significant amendments to the FRY Constitution which substantially reduced Montenegrin representation and basically abolished the equality between the two republics in the Federation (ICG 2000: 26-29).

Thus by 2000, Montenegro had acquired significant state-like attributes and the Federal institutions were almost indistinguishable from an extra layer of Serbian institutions. This process of dissociation owed a great deal to the actions of a Belgrade regime threatened by a reformist leader with a public mandate as well as international support. The divisions were furthermore increased by the perception in Podgorica that Milošević presented a military threat to Montenegro. Vojislav Šešelj, who was then Serbian Deputy Prime Minister, in 1999, warned that *'Montenegrin independence will end in blood'* (Tadić 1999). In Montenegro, Milošević had created a special unit of the Yugoslav Army, the 7th battalion, composed of Montenegrins loyal to the Federal state. Tensions ran especially high during the war in Kosovo, and in May 1999, Djukanović argued that the generals of the Yugoslav army were not in Montenegro to save it, but '*to implement the plans of an authoritarian regime'* (Ivanović 1999). In response, the Montenegrin Government had created a military police and the rhetoric of Đukanović gradually changed from one emphasising the threat from Belgrade as one of anti-democratic policies to a threat-image based on military security.

The developments were however not only caused by the actions of Belgrade and the interplay with Montenegrin dissociation; internal dynamics in Montenegro were also of importance and these gradually changed due to the increased divisions between Belgrade and Podgorica. After the split of DPS, the relations between DPS and Bulatović's SNP were decidedly bad and one of the main features of the 1998 election campaign was the extreme level of distrust, antagonism and mutual condemnation (OSCE 1998: 10-11). In response to the SNP's labelling of the DPS as 'anti-Yugoslav', the DPS tried to cast the SNP into political isolation as an 'anti-systemic' and 'anti-Montenegrin' force (Strmiska 2000: 4). The labelling of the conflict as one between Serbia and Montenegro was therefore also undertaken by the DPS. Đukanović was, however, not completely unconstrained in his increasingly separatist course: firstly, the rank and file of his party were more sceptical of the change in course (Ivanović 1998: 3), secondly in order to maintain its favourable centrist position in the party system, the DPS also had to distinguish itself from the more separatist forces in the Liberal Alliance (LSCG) (Strmiska 2000: 4). For the 1998 parliamentary elections, the DPS chose to form a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the People's Party (NS). This was a conflictual coalition from the outset composed of the NS which while anti-Milošević was also pro-Yugoslav and the SDP which pressured the DPS to take a more separatist stance. Incentives for taking a pro-independence stand had meanwhile become stronger due to a

change in public opinion. The conflict with Belgrade had slowly increased popular support for independence and increased the polarisation of Montenegrin society: Before the process of dissociation began, the number of supporters for Montenegrin independence ranged between 12 and 15 per cent of the electorate, but by September 1999, 43.9 per cent in a survey by Damar stated that they would vote for independence, while 38.9 per cent would vote against (Radulović 1999). Thus, while Đukanović's move towards independence was not unconstrained, the internal dynamics in Montenegro fostered incentives for an increasingly separatist stance.

Furthermore, Đukanović's dissent was strongly supported by Western powers that welcomed any basis of resistance against Milošević. And while Đukanović was simultaneously warned against declaring independence, the support nevertheless fuelled ambitions for exactly this independence (Cerović 2001a: 4). In 2000, when the end of Milošević reign was nearing, Đukanović was faced with strong cross-pressures. He had taken an increasingly pro-independence stance and Montenegro was close to having achieved de facto independence, and his coalition partner and an increasingly pro-independence electorate pressured him to take the final step and declare independence. The pro-independence parties were gaining in strength and confidence and Đukanović was having increasing difficulty keeping his coalition together (Dick 2000: 7).

At the same time, Đukanović was however warned against such a move by the international community and he was well aware of the possible dangers posed by a polarised Montenegrin population and by Milošević himself. As he put it: '*the reason we are so cautious is our awareness of the man with whom we live*' (Cohen 2000: 336), '*secession might entail either an internal conflict or the risk, albeit a much smaller risk, of violent external aggression on Montenegro*' (Cohen 2000: 307). Due to this cross-pressure, Đukanović continued his policy of gradualism or fence-sitting while hoping that time would make the situation more beneficial. In July 2000, he stated: '*A growing number of people in Montenegro understand the essence of the democratic, reform-oriented, and European option offered by the current Montenegrin leadership, and there are less and less impassioned pro-Milošević people. That is why we will not pursue a policy of rash moves… but will carefully follow developments on the international and domestic – Montenegrin and Yugoslav – political stages*' (Dick 2000: 3). Changes would however come before he knew it: In October 2000, Milošević acknowledged his defeat and with him the primary argument for Montenegrin independence disappeared. But by then, the process had gained its own momentum and backtracking proved difficult.

Developments Post-Milošević

Prior to the fall of Milošević, the Montenegrin Government had stated that it could not wait for Serbia to become democratic, but now when the undemocratic regime had fallen the Government found itself in a dilemma

(Cerović 2001a: 2). Given that the conflict had its primary roots in the aggressiveness of the Milošević regime, one could have expected that the regime-shift would lead to a quick resolution. But many things had changed since the process of dissociation started three years earlier. The Montenegrin Government and their allies had '*tasted some of the fruits of de facto independence*'(Roberts 2002: 6); the experience of de facto independence had fostered a political, business, and intellectual elite with strong interest in continued separation from Serbia (Simić 2002: 203). With the disappearance of the military threat from Serbia, formal independence suddenly seemed within the reach and Đukanović was pressured by both voters and political allies.

During Milošević's rule, the Montenegrin Government and the Serbian opposition had co-operated but their relationship had become strained by the decision of the Montenegrin Government to boycott the 2000 elections and by what the Montenegrin Government perceived as insufficient critique by the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) to the constitutional changes.[3] These grievances were exacerbated by DOS's coalition with the SNP, which was necessary to obtain a majority in the Federal Parliament. Moreover, polls taken shortly after the fall of Milošević point to increased, not reduced, support for Montenegrin independence: in October 2000, the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM) found that 48.1 per cent would vote 'yes' in an independence referendum, while 39.9 per cent would 'no' (Šćekić 2000). Rather than rebuilding the bridges with Serbia, Đukanović chose to openly declare his desire to turn Montenegro into an independent state and the main committee of the DPS proposed that Serbia and Montenegro become two internationally recognised sovereign states (Tadić 2000). The result of the fall of Milošević was therefore increased polarisation within Montenegro over the issue of statehood (Roberts 2002: 5; Bieber 2002: 1).

In December 2000, the Montenegrin Government issued a 'Revised Platform' which envisaged a very loose confederation between Serbia and Montenegro. Compared to the 1999 Platform this structure had even fewer links between the two republics: it was a union of two fully independent and internationally recognised states (Government of Montenegro 2000; Cerović 2001a: 8). However, not all parties in the anti-Milošević camp supported the continued move towards independence, and the NS chose to leave the Government and join the pro-Yugoslav coalition. The split in the governing coalition led to early parliamentary elections in 2001, which left Đukanović's Government dependent on the separatists in LSCG for its parliamentary majority. The LSCG forced the DPS to promise to hold an independence referendum within the following year and Đukanović was therefore constrained in his pro-independence stand, despite the reduced popular support for the pro-independence parties. The DPS adopted an increasingly strident pro-independence stand and at its 2001 congress the party statute and programme was changed deleting all references to the Yugoslav Federation and pledging an effort to secure independence for Montenegro (DPA 2001). Đukanović was, however, faced with polls beginning to show declining support for independence as well as

rumours of splits within his own party over the issue (See e.g. Centre for Democracy and Human Rights 2002a; ICG 2001: 22). In addition, the pro-independence stand ran counter to a change in the international climate: the EU and the US strongly warned Montenegro against seeking independence, which they argued could open a Pandora's Box in the Former Yugoslavia by opening anew border disputes. Once again, Đukanović therefore found himself playing for time and hoping for the emergence of a friendlier domestic and international environment (ESI 2001: 3).

In Belgrade, the issue of future Serbian-Montenegrin relations played into the power struggle between President Vojislav Koštunica and Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (Cerović 2001a:8). Đinđić saw an interest in preserving the unresolved status quo; he could pursue his own agenda while Koštunica's political star slowly waned and he was therefore largely passive in attempts to reach a solution (ESI 2001: 6). Koštunica, on the other hand, was more constrained than Đinđić: firstly, his post as Yugoslav President depended on a resolution of the Montenegrin issue; secondly, he was constrained by his ideological commitment to Yugoslavia (ESI 2001:7). At the same time, reformist forces were pressing for a solution, since the unresolved constitutional situation was seen as a hindrance to necessary reforms and therefore to international financial assistance. In early 2001, the Yugoslav Parliament adopted a proposal drafted by Koštunica which envisaged a reestablishment of the Federation. This proposal was, however, not well received in Podgorica where Đukanović argued that *'In many aspects this proposal puts Montenegro in a worse position than it was according to the Constitution of 1992'* (Đukanović 2001).

In October 2001, Đukanović, Koštunica and Đinđić met in Belgrade and they concluded that their positions were irreconcilable. Koštunica stated that *'this practically means that the Montenegrin public should vote on the issue in a referendum'* (ESI 2001: 1). The scene therefore looked set for a final test of Montenegrin public opinion and the dissolution of the third Yugoslavia seemed to be nearing. Thus, the fall of Milošević did not bring with it a resolution of the Serbian-Montenegrin conflict: the dynamics of the conflict had changed, the process had gained its own momentum, the population in Montenegro was polarised, and important political elites had interests in the continued separation of the two republics.

Belgrade Agreement: The Creation of 'Solania'

In late 2001, Serbia and Montenegro were therefore close to approving a Montenegrin referendum on independence. This however fuelled EU and US fears over the stability of the region and the EU chose to send its diplomatic heavyweight, Javier Solana, to prevent such a development. Both sides are heavily dependent on financial aid from international donors and especially Đukanović, who had all along cast himself as pro-Western, had little room to manoeuvre (Roberts 2002: 2, 7). In addition, the pressure from the EU may have been the possibility for back-tracking that he had been looking for given the

persisting divisions in Montenegro (van Meurs 2003: 64). Solana could therefore make Đukanović back away from his commitment to hold an independence referendum in the spring of 2002, and after lengthy negotiations, the parties on 14 March 2002 finally reached agreement on new relations between the two republics. The so-called Belgrade Agreement sets up a very loose federation with the new name "Serbia and Montenegro", and it specifies that after three years, either republic can hold a referendum on independence.

With the Belgrade Agreement, Đukanović had agreed to put Montenegrin independence on hold for at least the next three years, and while Đukanović sought to present it as a step on Montenegro's road to independence, it caused uproar among his coalition partners, the SDP and LSCG, and the LSCG described the Agreement as an act of *'great treason'* (Centre for Democracy and Human Rights 2002b: 4). After the initial shock, the SDP was eventually persuaded by Đukanović to back his stand, but the LSCG withdrew its support for the Government which thereby lost its parliamentary majority. The pro-Yugoslav coalition initially reacted with satisfaction, but then became somewhat bewildered by the Serbian perception of the agreement as a victory for Đukanović and a harbinger of Montenegrin independence (Roberts 2002: 3). Surprisingly, the separatist LSCG chose to coalesce with the pro-Yugoslav coalition in a bid to defeat Đukanović in the early parliamentary elections on 20 October 2002. This shift once again underlines the fluidity of the Montenegrin conflict and furthermore illustrates that the LSCG may be more intent on destroying Đukanović and the DPS than on achieving independence (Roberts 2002: 9). The party, however, failed to bring its voters along and was harshly punished in the elections in which the LSCG lost two of their six seats and almost a third of their votes. The big winner of the elections was Đukanović's coalition, the 'Democratic List for a European Montenegro', which secured 39 out of 75 seats in support of its middle-of-the-road course. This left Đukanović in a strong position for the implementation of the agreement; he no longer relied on the support of the erratic LSCG and he apparently had the voters behind him. The Belgrade Agreement has thereby so far proved to be a solution capable of winning popular support in Montenegro. According to a poll by CEDEM in April 2002, 61.1 per cent supported the agreement while 23.0 per cent were against. At the same time, 42.4 per cent would still vote 'yes' in a referendum on independence, while 40.2 per cent would vote 'no', and the divisions over the future status of Montenegro therefore persist (CEDEM April 2002).

In Serbia, the agreement was widely seen as a victory for Đukanović and as a stepping stone to Montenegrin independence, or at best a sticking-plaster solution (Roberts 2002: 2). Serbian Justice Minister, Vladen Batić, argued that Montenegro was only biding their time before going their own way (Beograd.com 27 December 2002). Miroljub Labus, President of G17 Plus, echoed this sentiment when he argued that Solana had carried out his mediator mission '*badly*' and had been biased in favour of Montenegro; '*Brussels' actions are not helping preserve the joint state*' (Beograd.com 17 December 2002). While the reformists are mostly concerned that the new state structure will prove

unworkable and therefore frustrate the reform process, extreme nationalists described the agreement as a sell-out (Roberts 2002: 2).

The conflict however also fed into the ongoing power struggle between Đinđić and Koštunica, and changes in their relative power have affected the implementation of the agreement. In order to consolidate his power, Koštunica chose to run for the Serbian presidency, however due to insufficient voter turnout both the first and the second ballot were declared invalid. This gave Đinđić incentives to push for the implementation of the agreement, since Koštunica thereby lost his power base as Yugoslav president and the new Serbian-Montenegrin state looked set to be dominated by an alliance run by Đinđić and Đukanović (Cvijanović 2003). After Đinđić's assassination, the future distribution of power in Serbia remains uncertain and this is bound to also affect the new state structure.

It is still too early to tell what will happen after the three year interregnum after which an independence referendum can be held. However, there are some indications. In his inaugural speech in January 2003, Đukanović predicted that Montenegro would be an independent state within three years (Radulović 2003).[4] In terms of internal politics in Montenegro, Đukanović is in a strong position and his pro-independence bloc will be able to shape the political environment and set the political agenda over the next three years. In Serbia, power is being consolidated at the Serbian level, which could also signal that Montenegrin independence has merely been put on hold (Roberts 2002: 9). In addition to the future political competition in Serbia, a crucial factor will be the position of the EU: will the EU accept that 'Solania' will cease to exist after three years or are we to witness another round of arm twisting?

Ethnicity in the conflict

The conflict between Serbia and Montenegro started out as a within-regime split over the need for reforms. It could therefore seem erroneous to characterise the conflict as an ethnic conflict and in the literature on the conflict, ethnicity is usually argued to be of secondary importance (e.g. Calhoun 2000: 64). I will, however, argue that ethnicity plays an increasingly important role in the conflict, but this is ethnicity of a very fluid nature which affects the dynamics of the conflict.

In the Yugoslav census, the distinct nationality of Montenegrins was acknowledged and in 1991 the composition of the republic was a follows: 61.8 pct Montenegrins, 14.6 pct Muslims, 9.3 pct Serbs, 6.7 pct Albanians and 4.2 pct Yugoslavs. These numbers are however quite misleading since the Montenegrin category can reflect a national identity, a regional identity or even a dual identity. Many of the people who fall into this category will therefore regard themselves as 'Montenegrin Serbs' or as 'Montenegrin Yugoslavs'.[5] There is furthermore an element of fluidity which is illustrated if we compare the 1991 census with the census from 1981 in which 68.5 pct declared themselves to be Montenegrin and only 3.3 pct declared themselves as Serbs (Isaković 2000: 146). The upsurge of

Serbian nationalism in the intermediate period surely holds some of the explanation for this change and it reflects the diversity of the 'Montenegrin' category.

Two related factors point to the lack of importance of ethnicity in the conflict: The people who see themselves as Montenegrins are split on the issue of Montenegrin independence and Đukanović's pro-independence government attracts multiethnic support. Given the divisions among the Montenegrins, Đukanović had to rely on attracting the minority groups to his policies of dissociation from Belgrade, reforms and minority rights. Based on similar reasoning, Florian Bieber therefore argues that '*political divisions do not follow ethnic lines*' (Bieber 2002: 7). Andrei Simić likewise contends that the conflict reflects '*a schism within Montenegrin society itself*' rather than '*a cleavage between Serbs and Montenegrins*' (Simić 1997: 122).

The split in 1997 was, however, not a complete u-turn in Serb-Montenegrin relations; it had its precedent in the conflict after the First World War between the *Whites* and *Greens;* between proponents of Montenegro's Serbdom and integration into Serbia, and supporters of Montenegrin identity and independence (Isaković 2000: 265. Bieber 2003: 28). Underlying the close relations between Montenegrins and Serbs, differences had remained and these differences were primarily based on state traditions and political choice. Identity is closely connected with political affiliation (Pavlović 2003: 101), and the divisions among the people who regard themselves as Montenegrins can therefore to some extent be seen as a division between 'Montenegrin Serbs' and 'Montenegrin Montenegrins'. Based on this fluid and even dual nature of Montenegrin identity, Srdjan Darmanović describes Montenegro's dilemma as that of a '*national homo duplex*', a victim of a '*double or divided national consciousness*es' (Roberts 2002: 4).

Though there were historic precedents, the 1997 split was, nevertheless, not a direct continuation of the conflict between the 'Whites' and the 'Greens', since the People's Party (NS) which sees itself as being part of the 'White' tradition, also supported the dissociation from Belgrade.[6] But since the split in 1997, the dynamics of the conflict and the accompanying rhetoric has undergone a change and the divide between Montenegrins and Serbs has become clearer. After the regime change in Belgrade, the discourse of the pro-independence parties had to change to reflect the changed situation. Rather than pointing to the undemocratic nature of the Yugoslav regime and the military threat posed by Milošević, the Montenegrin Government increasingly started to emphasise the Montenegrin *right* to independent statehood. The claim for independence was justified by pointing to Montenegro's state tradition, its negative experience with three Yugoslav states, its stable democratic institutions, its harmonious inter-ethnic relations, and finally by pointing to the decision of the Badinter Commission (Simić 2002: 204-5. See also Đukanović 2001). In the 2001 election campaign, the pro-independence parties continued to portray Serbia as a threat waiting in the shadow to counter any pro-independence moves; by force if necessary (Radulović 2001). And they were quick to seize on any Belgrade

statements that might be interpreted as hegemonic or nationalistic (Cerović 2001b). But there were also attempts to discover new roots of Montenegrin identity (Cerović 2001b). At the DPS conference in October 2001, Đukanović stated that without independence, Montenegro would be condemned to disappear as a state *and* as a nation (DPA 2001). Earlier that year, Đukanović similarly argued that a union of two independent states would '*enable the preservation of the state and national identity both of Montenegro and Serbia*' (Đukanović 2001). Interestingly, the unit whose national identity needs to be preserved is the Montenegrin *state* not the Montenegrin *nation*. This could seem to be a confusion of concepts but it of course reflects the multiethnic basis of Đukanović's government as well as the ambiguous nature of Montenegrin identity.

Given the increased importance of ethnicity and the attempts to create a distinct Montenegrin identity, the competition and divisions within the pro-independence bloc can be seen as intra-*ethnic* divisions. A similar characterisation can be used for the dynamics within the pro-Yugoslav bloc. The continued fluidity of Montenegrin identity, however, affects these dynamics that take on a different character than in more rigidly divided conflicts. It allows for a more fluid political system in which possible alliances are not preordained, and this reduces the risk that the conflict will be frozen in a prolonged stalemate. This was well illustrated by the changing alliances after Milošević's fall: had the conflict been strictly organised along ethnic lines, the shift of the NS from the pro-independence Government to the pro-Yugoslav coalition would have been highly unlikely. However, with this change, the divide between the Whites and the Greens was re-established and political choice and national affinities became more closely connected.

Furthermore, the fluidity also restricts more exclusive appeals to group identity and therefore permits the appeal to be extended to other ethnic groups. The DPS appeals to voters without a uniform identity (Pavlović 2003: 102) and its appeals to national identity are therefore cast in a fairly ambiguous or even diffuse language. Some of the other pro-independence parties, however, appeal to voters that are more unambiguously Montenegrin and for example the very separatist Liberal Alliance more clearly emphasises the distinct national identity of the Montenegrins and has made accusations of Serbian cultural assimilation (Simić 1997: 127).

The importance of elite interests in this conflict need not be decisively different from the other conflicts and wars in the former Yugoslavia. But the elites in Serbia and Montenegro had already been warned of the possible consequences if the conflict turned violent. Their power-seeking motivations and pragmatism may have made them better able to step back from the abyss, and the policy of gradualism prevented them from painting themselves into a corner. The greater fluidity of identity made conflict mobilisation more difficult and therefore constrained the elites: it helped prevent the extreme spiralling of conflict and therefore at the same time gave the elites more freedom; for backtracking, compromising and changing alliances. This, I would argue, is more important for

the prevention of a violent conflict than NATO's promise to protect Montenegro in case of a military attack from Belgrade.

Conclusion: Elites Interests and Changed Conflict Dynamics

What started out as a conflict over democratic and economic reforms gradually transformed itself into a conflict over Montenegrin statehood cast in the language of Montenegrin rights and identity. The explanation for this change in the conflict is to be found in both the interplay between the elites in Serbia and Montenegro and the internal dynamics in Montenegro and Serbia. The interplay between Serbia and Montenegro as well as international involvement have been important for the course of the conflict, but the fall of Milošević showed that other dynamics were also at play. Internal dynamics in Montenegro and Serbia seem to have been as decisive for the development of the conflict as the relations *between* Serbia and Montenegro. Elite interests have been crucial in the conflict; interests in initiating the conflict and in casting it in separatist terms as well as in prolonging it. The political leaders have, however, not been unconstrained; they have been constrained by internal competition and by their former actions and rhetoric.

The Montenegrin conflict shares similarities with other conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, but there are also important differences. Like the conflicts in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo it is a conflict over statehood and there is a sizeable Serbian minority within the republic which has received more or less overt support from Belgrade. However, both the relations with Belgrade and within Montenegro differ from the other conflicts: the conflict has not turned violent and the ethnic identities are more fluid. These factors are most probably related in that the lack of clear division is likely to have decreased the risk of violence, and the absence of violence has in turn avoided the freezing of identities that we have seen in other conflicts. The latter interplay illustrates the contextual nature of ethnicity; the ethnic identities in Montenegro have been affected by the course of the conflict, which has in large part been caused by elite interests and elite competition. This does not mean that these developments have been unconstrained, that elites can freely manipulate the course of a conflict, but it nevertheless points to ethnic conflicts being strongly affected by elite interests as well as by contingencies and unintended consequences caused by internal elite competition and by the interplay between opposing ethnic groups.

Endnotes

[1] This schism between the party's Montenegrin origins and its Belgrade loyalties led to a split in the party after the fall of Milošević and the victory of the Montenegrin-based wing.
[2] Montenegro now uses the Euro.

[3] Before Kostunica became DOS's presidential candidate, Đukanović had even been offered to lead the opposition against Milošević, but he declined the offer.
[4] Đukanović has stepped down as Montenegrin President and has instead taken the post as Prime Minister.
[5] The proportion who regards themselves as 'Montenegrin Serbs' is usually estimated to be around 20 pct. (E.g. Filipović, 2001)
[6] The NS had among its goals to '*assert the Serbian ethos in Montenegro*' (Vukomanović, 1998: 47-48)

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