

# Montenegro's Foreign Policy Evolution: Caught Between Serbia and the West

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**Abstract:** This article examines Montenegro's political and foreign policy transformation between 1997 and 2000, focusing on its gradual shift from alignment with Serbia toward its independent international orientation. The hypothesis is that this shift was driven by internal political changes and Montenegro's evolving identity as a distinct political actor, shaped by key regional events, such as the Kosovo issue and the NATO intervention. The research is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: constructivism, which highlights the role of identity and political narrative in shaping foreign policy; federalism, which explains internal tensions within the federation; and small state theory, which analyzes how small navigate regional conflicts to assert autonomy. The objective is to understand how domestic and international factors interacted to redefine Montenegro's diplomatic behavior and strategic choices. A qualitative historical-analytical methodology is employed, using primary and secondary sources to trace this evolution. The research demonstrates that Montenegro's shift was not merely reactive, but part of a broader redefinition of its identity and foreign policy, laying the foundation for its future path toward statehood and international recognition.

**Keywords:** Montenegro, Serbia, Yugoslavia, Democratic Party of Socialists, Milo Đukanović, diplomacy

## Introduction

In Europe, no political party has managed to dominate the political scene as long as the Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska partija socijalista*, DPS) has managed in Montenegro. The party remained continuously in power

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from the advent of multiparty politics in 1990 until 2020, when the first electoral change of power occurred (Laštro et al. 2023, 210).<sup>2</sup>

The prolonged rule of this dominant party played a significant role in shaping the broader regional shift toward authoritarianism across the Western Balkans (Pavlović 2016). The DPS emerged on the political scene as the successor to the League of Communists of Montenegro (*Savez komunista Crne Gore*, SKCG).<sup>3</sup> It remained in power continuously from 1945 to 2020, despite significant leadership changes and internal reforms (Bešić and Baća 2024, 2). However, this continuity should not be taken to imply that the party was monolithic or unresponsive to change. On the contrary, the reforms undertaken in 1989 and again in 1997 reflected shifts in the political landscape and represented efforts to adapt to evolving societal and geopolitical dynamics (Biber 2020, 63).

The DPS has a communist background, marked not by a break from the 56+ “old regime” and its replacement with a democratic one, but rather by a top-down reform within the existing ruling structure (new political elite of “young, good-looking and intelligent” - the trio of Momir Bulatović, Milo Đukanović and Svetozar Marović). This “system” ensured the preservation of a strong political infrastructure, party membership, institutional resources and ideological legacy. Also, the DPS controlled Montenegrin state institutions and resources, shaping the economy to serve its political and clientelist interests (Uzelac 2003; Lazić 2018).

During the early multiparty era (until 1997), the party maintained a pro-Serbian orientation and fostered close ties with Serbia, cooperating closely with and aligning itself with the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS) led by Slobodan Milošević. That year marked a turning point in the recent history of Montenegro. Thereafter, the DPS increasingly aligned itself with the project of Montenegrin nation-building and the creation of an

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<sup>2</sup> Montenegro was, until August 2020, the only European country that never seen a change of government through elections since introducing parliamentary voting in 1906.

<sup>3</sup> For years, the Montenegrin government operated out the premises leased from the DPS, which the party has inherited from the republican SKCG. In that way, the ruling party, by renting office space to the government, generated millions of euros in revenue (OSCE/ODIHR 2009).

independent country, establishing itself as a so-called “state-building party” (Šorović 2024, 144; Laštro et al. 2023, 222). By distancing itself from Serbian nationalism and Milošević, the DPS carved out a new political space, while maintaining a firm grip on power. Centers of political influence were consolidated during the party’s rule, with Đukanović exercising tight control over the levers of power. During this period, a *de facto* presidential system was established. Regardless of whether he held the position of Party Leader, Prime Minister or President, Đukanović consistently remained the central figure of informal power (Biber 2020, 64-65).

The DPS has been characterized by a flexible ideological orientation and significant shifts in its political program. Over the course of the three decades in power, the party underwent several ideological transformations, spanning a broad spectrum, many of which were contradictory or mutually exclusive. These shifts subtly altered the political trajectory of the party, moving it “from socialist to neoliberal, from pro-Serb to Montenegrin nationalist, from social democratic to populist, and from authoritarian to pro-European”, in a huge range of ideological orientation (Laštro et al. 2023, 222). Thus, over the decades, the DPS built a patronage network to secure support (Keil 2018; Džankić 2018) and it used populist rhetoric to justify undemocratic practices as defenses against a shifting “ethno-national other” (purportedly striving to weaken the Montenegrin statehood and alter its political course), while patterns of discrimination and stigmatization remained consistent (Komar and Živković 2016; Džankić and Keil 2017; Bešić and Baća 2024; Baća 2024).

Within the political framework of Montenegro, the DPS is characterized as a dominant political actor, with its role and governance generally examined across two distinct phases. The first phase, spanning from 1990 to 1997, is often described by scholars as a form of competitive authoritarianism (Biber 2020). The second phase begins in 1997, when the DPS established the first multiparty government with the support of ethnic minority groups, thereby positioning Montenegro within the category of an electoral democracy.<sup>4</sup> However, depending on the specific period under investigation, researchers

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<sup>4</sup> This period can be understood as an ideological transformation (Kovačević 2007), as well as a consequence of a high degree of party institutionalization (Vuković 2013). Similarly, it can be seen as a strategic alignment with prevailing national divisions in Montenegrin society, between pro-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian identity (Komar and Živković 2016).

have applied different theoretical approaches to explain the mechanisms behind the political dominance of the DPS. The success of this party prior to 1997 is largely attributed to electoral manipulation, the use of internal mechanisms of ethno-political clientelism, extensive propaganda efforts and comprehensive control over the media, particularly through state institutions, such as Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG) and the daily newspaper *Pobjeda*. Repressive and institutional control was exercised by the ruling elite, alongside the systematic use of public resources for political purposes, manifested through practices of clientelism and patronage (Darmanović 2003, 147; Vuković 2013, 4-5).

Regardless of this proposed periodization of the DPS governance, recent research continues to affirm the undemocratic character of the DPS rule, classifying Montenegro as a competitive authoritarian regime even after the transitional year of 1997 (Levitsky and Way 2021). Furthermore, despite suffering a political defeat in the parliamentary elections (August 30th, 2020), the DPS has remained committed to its ideological and party agenda. This was reaffirmed by then-party leader Milo Đukanović at the Ninth Party Congress, where he asserted that “there is no civic and European Montenegro without a strong and progressive DPS at its core” (DPS 2021). This statement underscores the party’s ongoing ambition to regain power or participate in a newly formed ruling coalition.

Finally, the evolution of Montenegro’s foreign policy remains a relevant subject, particularly given the country’s ongoing efforts to balance its historical ties with Serbia and its strategic orientation toward the West. In a shifting geopolitical environment, this dilemma continues to shape domestic politics and international relations in the Western Balkans.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Regarding this complex history between 1997 and 2000, Montenegro experienced a fundamental and strategic shift that redefined its foreign policy, transitioning from strict alignment with Serbia under the regime of Slobodan Milošević to a more autonomous and independent international stance. This shift was driven by internal political divisions within the DPS, responses to

the Kosovo conflict and Montenegro's distinct diplomatic actions during key regional crises, culminating in the emergence of a new foreign policy concept oriented toward sovereignty and greater international engagement.

The hypothesis of this study is grounded in the theory of constructivism in international relations, which emphasizes how international identity and political narratives shape diplomatic behavior and strategic choices (the evolving self-perception of Montenegro as a distinct political entity being central to understanding its foreign policy redefinition). The constructivist theory is based on the belief that concepts such as security, international order or national interest are not objective categories, but rather the products of social construction shaped through identities, narratives and discourses (Kolodziej 2005, 260-262). The identity of a country, how it perceives itself and how it is perceived by others, plays a crucial role in determining its foreign policy behavior (Wendt 1992, 396-399). However, actors in international relations do not act according to "reality" itself, but according to the meanings they assign to it. The international order, institutions and strategies are products of such constructions. Countries, just like individuals, interpret the world through their own identity-based lenses. Narratives about "the other" - often perceived as a state enemy - help consolidate self-identity and legitimize political actions. Therefore, the sense of belonging and the readiness to defend one's constructed identity often outweigh historical or factual disputes (Puljić 2023). Nations are fundamental intersubjective constructs, rooted in imagined bonds among people who may never meet. As Benedict Anderson puts it, a nation is an "imagined political community" (Anderson 1991, 6), held together by shared meanings rather than objective realities.

Unlike liberalism and realism, constructivism does not assume universal notions of human nature, but focuses on how actors interpret themselves and their surroundings. This allows us to adapt specific cases and avoid normative bias. Also, constructivism integrates domestic politics into the analysis of foreign policy, recognizing that the legitimizing narratives often emerge within the international arena. Through its connection with political theory (especially poststructuralism), constructivism offers deeper insight into the interplay of truth, power and discourse (Lyotard 1991; Foucault 1994). Rather than seeking universal solutions, it centers on subjective perceptions

and meanings, providing a more flexible and context-sensitive tool for analyzing international relations (Puljić 2023).

The second theoretical framework employed in this article is the federalism approach, which explains the internal tensions within the third Yugoslavia and Montenegro's trajectory toward autonomy amid the disintegration of the federal system. Federalism is the most suitable model for political association in which different communities retain their identity, while striving toward common goals (Friedrich 1963). Liberal democracy is necessary, but not sufficient for the existence of a genuine federation, while formal constitutions without substantive content lead to so-called "façade federations". This was the case with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which Milan Popović describes as a fictitious federation lacking real equality, similar to communist states such as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Czechoslovakia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Popović 1996, 120). Also, Carl J. Friedrich emphasizes that true federal systems require constitutionally protected autonomy, which was absent in the Soviet model (Friedrich 1963, 596). Federalism and nationalism are not inherently opposed. Rather, their relationship depends on the structure of the political entities that are involved (Šorović 2024, 95).

The third framework is crisis diplomacy, which analyzes how small countries negotiate their international positioning and leverage diplomatic opportunities during regional conflicts (e.g., the Kosovo issue and NATO intervention). This theoretical approach provides an adequate example of how internal political shifts influenced external relations and foreign policy innovation during a critical period of regional upheaval.

In accordance with the theme of this article and the issues discussed, this research employs a qualitative historical-analytical methodology, combining primary and secondary sources to trace Montenegro's political and diplomatic evolution from 1997 to 2000. However, the Montenegrin political transformation between 1997 and 2000 is best understood through the lens of constructivist theory, which emphasizes the central role of identity, narratives and perception in shaping foreign policy behavior. Montenegro gradually distanced itself from the Milošević regime and began to assert a more autonomous position on the international stage, domestic debates over sovereignty and independence intensified. It was not merely reacting to

external events, but actively redefining its own political identity. This evolving self-perception, as a distinct entity separate from Serbia, played a crucial role in legitimizing its shift in foreign policy. Constructivism allows us to see how internal political discourse, particularly within the ruling DPS and among Montenegrin elites, constructed a narrative of sovereignty and international engagement that resonated with broader societal aspirations. Rather than acting based solely on material interests or objective threats, Montenegro responded to its interpretation of international norms, regional development (the Kosovo crisis) and its own imagined political community. This constructed identity became a strategic tool in navigating complex diplomatic challenges and in redefining Montenegro's role within the collapsing Yugoslav federation.

### **The Split Between Đukanović and Milošević: The Division Within the DPS**

In the early 1990s, the President of Montenegro and the leader of the DPS, Momir Bulatović, publicly claimed that the party leadership was incapable of creating an independent Montenegrin state (Bulatović 2020, 93). Ironically, just a few years later, that same party would begin charting a course toward Montenegrin independence. Following the DPS's strong performance in the 1996 elections, tensions within the party leadership began to escalate. In 1997, Bulatović, under the pressure from Belgrade, attempted to marginalize then Prime Minister and Vice President of DPS, Milo Đukanović, in a surprising power play to regain control (Nikolić and Popović 2013). Initially, at the March 1997 session of the DPS Main Board (*Glavni odbor DPS-a*), Bulatović secured majority support for his initiative to reduce Đukanović's power (Šorović 2024). However, in an unexpected shift, the party majority turned in Đukanović's favor. On July 11, 1997, at the 17<sup>th</sup> session of the Main Board, a vote of no confidence was passed against Bulatović (Andrijašević 2021, 356-357), resulting in his political expulsion.

The split within the DPS marked a significant political rupture. It was the first time in Montenegrin parliamentary history that a ruling party, after winning an election and forming a government, internally fractured without external pressure (Šćekić 2012, 121; Bulatović 2020). The reasons for the

schism extended beyond personal rivalry and were rooted in conflicting political visions of Montenegro's future. One of the primary catalysts for the split was Đukanović's growing criticism of Slobodan Milošević. In an interview for Belgrade newspaper *Vreme*, Đukanović described Milošević as a politician "devoid of strategic vision" and "a politician from the past". This statement, according to Montenegrin newspaper *Monitor* (April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1997), symbolized the "cutting of the umbilical cord" between Montenegro and Serbia (Janković 2020; Pavlović 2016). From that point on, Đukanović began gradually distancing himself from the Yugoslav President and from hard-line policies emanating from Serbia.

Political analyst Milka Tadić Mijović argued that Đukanović's shift was strategic, that he was a "political survivor" and knew how to adapt to remain in power (Janković 2020). His break from Belgrade included a firm rejection of the growing influence of the Yugoslav United Left (*Jugoslovenska udružena levica*, JUL), led by Milošević's wife, Mira Marković. In fact, Đukanović refused to allow JUL-affiliated cadres to assume control over Montenegrin economic institutions and publicly criticized her party as ideologically regressive and economically unrealistic. He famously advised JUL members to "remain just spouses", alluding directly to Marković, which triggered a smear campaign from Belgrade, branding Đukanović and his allies as "smugglers" and "mafia figures" (Nikolić and Popović 2013, 29). According to Đukanović, the final rupture occurred after a visit to Washington in early 1997, when fabricated letters alleging his support for Montenegrin secession were circulated in Belgrade to justify his political removal (Štavljanin 2008). This was a statement Đukanović made during an interview with Radio Free Europe (*Radio Slobodna Evropa*). From today's perspective, despite his persuasive rhetoric and demagoguery, it was not merely a political conflict or the spreading of falsehoods, but rather a much deeper divergence within the Yugoslav political elite (Šorović 2024, 147). Later, Momir Bulatović admitted that the political split stemmed from differing visions: he remained loyal to Milošević's idea of a unified Yugoslavia, while Đukanović increasingly promoted Montenegrin autonomy. Also, Bulatović accused Đukanović of facilitating illegal economic activities, including cigarette smuggling and money laundering through offshore companies. He claimed that Western powers, particularly the U.S.A., exerted pressure on Đukanović to abandon Milošević, further deepening the



rift (Nikolić and Popović 2013, 40; Bulatović 2020, 269-274; Perović 2019).

Academic analyses support the interpretation of the DPS split as a reflection of broader international developments.<sup>5</sup> As stated in an interview with Dr. Dejan Jović (July 13, 2023), the year 1997 had represented a turning point: the West, seeking to prevent further conflict in the Balkans, began supporting liberal democrats over authoritarian nationalists. The UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, U.S. President Bill Clinton and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder saw regime change in Serbia as a prerequisite for regional peace. Montenegro, under Đukanović, presented an opportunity for the West to weaken Milošević from within the federation. However, former Yugoslav Foreign Minister Goran Svilanović noted in an interview on August 2, 2023 that Đukanović anticipated the inevitable failure of Milošević's policies (militarily and diplomatically) and made the right decision by distancing himself. Similarly, Professor Gordana Đurović similarly stated (in an interview held on March 15, 2023) that Montenegro's political elite realized they had no meaningful influence within federal decision-making processes and were treated as subordinates rather than partners (Šorović 2024, 145-146).

This divergence resulted in the formation of two separate parties. Bulatović founded the Socialist People's Party (*Socijalistička narodna partija Crne Gore*, SNP), claiming to represent the "true" DPS, while Đukanović retained the DPS name and transformed it into a pro-European, reformist party and also included minority national parties in the government. This produced two political and identity camps: one advocating a continued union with Serbia and a Serb national identity (SNP), and another promoting a distinct Montenegrin identity and future independence (DPS) (Darmanović 2007; Šćekić 2012, 165).

The DPS split deepened social divisions in Montenegrin society, particularly among Orthodox Christians, who began politically identifying as either Montenegrins or Serbs (Džankić 2015; Vuković 2015; Bešić and Baća 2024). Over time, Đukanović's DPS shed its religious elements by

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<sup>5</sup> The three views presented in this article (those of Jović, Svilanović and Đurović) are based on interviews conducted by the author as part of her doctoral research for the dissertation titled "The Influence of Montenegro on the Foreign Policy of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (1992-2006)".

incorporating minority parties into government, whereas the SNP aligned with Serbian Orthodoxy and traditional nationalist discourse. Despite a tense and divided political climate, Đukanović won the 1997 presidential elections and solidified his position in the parliamentary elections of 1998. During the NATO intervention (1999), Montenegro remained officially neutral and rejected Belgrade's mobilization orders, signaling an open break with Milošević.<sup>6</sup> Later, Montenegro introduced the German mark as legal tender, took control of customs and foreign trade and reduced federal institutions to symbolic entities. These moves signaled the final phase of Đukanović's break from the old DPS ideology (Darmanović 2006, 15). Following Milošević's fall on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000, Montenegro accelerated its push for independence. The new DPS ideology, now centered on the "subjectivization of Montenegro", laid the foundation for the independence referendum in 2006 (Rastoder 2011, 258). Bulatović, in contrast, remained loyal to Milošević and continued advocating for a Yugoslavia "without alternative".

## The Kosovo Issue

Based on a literature review of how the issue is represented, the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija (K&M) has deep and complex historical roots. Many scholars and political analysts offer varying interpretations of its origins. Some associate it with early Albanian migrations, others with the establishment of the League of Prizren (1878), the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), two world wars or with tensions during the communist period and the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Woehrel 1999). The fact is: for Serbs, Kosovo is a powerful national and spiritual symbol, representing the center of the medieval Serbian state and the site of important Orthodox Christian heritage. Conversely, for Albanians, the formation of the League of Prizren marked the

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<sup>6</sup> Up to a certain point, Montenegrin public supported Milošević and his approach to leading Yugoslavia. This loyalty was partly rooted in his Montenegrin heritage - he was originally from Lijeva Rijeka (northern part of Montenegro), so many Montenegrins referred to him as „on of ours“. It was also, to some extent, due to his open defiance of the West, which resonated with Montenegro's historical tradition of rebellion and resistance (Vladislavljević 2020, 214).

beginning of their national awakening. But, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the Ottoman Empire began to weaken and gradually withdraw from the Balkans, conflicting Serbian and Albanian national aspirations began to emerge in the region (Vladisavljević 2020; Crnobrnja 1996; Biserko 2012). Since then, tensions, conflicts and misunderstandings between the two ethnic groups have continued in K&M, and unfortunately, even today, not much has changed in that area. After 1945, Kosovo was granted the status of an autonomous province within the Socialist Republic of Serbia, as well as some of the prerogatives of the republics. More precisely, the postwar Yugoslav leadership, led by Tito, tried to address Kosovo's demands by granting it greater autonomy, economic aid and recognition of Albanian national rights rather than full republican status. Through constitutional changes in 1968, 1971 and particularly 1974, Kosovo gained significant autonomy, including the right to participate in federal governance and display its symbols. These reforms reduced Serbian influence and promoted decentralization across Yugoslavia. However, this shift fueled regional and ethnic divisions, especially within the ruling Communist Party, which remained authoritarian, but became fragmented along ethnic lines (Kofos and Veremis 1998; Pavlowich 1988, 82).

While the Albanian population expanded their corpus of rights, including language recognition and education in their mother tongue, many Albanians sought broader political status, some even demanding republican status within Yugoslavia. However, in 1981, massive protests erupted in Kosovo, demanding greater provincial autonomy or even unification with Albania. These demands were rejected by the Serbian and Yugoslav leaderships, leading to rising tensions and an increase in the emigration of Serbs (and Montenegrins) from the province due to perceived pressure (Hudson 2003, 64-65; Poulton 1991, 57).<sup>7</sup> The Kosovo issue was the first to unsettle

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<sup>7</sup> In 1913, Metohija was incorporated into the territory of Montenegro. According to professor Vladisavljević, at one point, approximately 15% of the population in Kosovo identified as part of the Montenegrin minority, which was officially recognized as distinct from the Serbian population through specific legal and administrative classifications. However, due to the overlapping and non-exclusive nature of Montenegrin and Serbian identities, these communities were eventually grouped together, particularly in the context of Serb-Albanian relations. This convergence reflected political expediency and the fluidity of national identities in the region during that period (Vladisavljević 2020, 111).

Yugoslavia's leadership. Originating from 19<sup>th</sup> century irredentist nationalism, it persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ultimately signaled the beginning of Yugoslavia's collapse following the death of Josip Broz Tito (Kofos and Veremis 1998).

Within international centers of power, the Kosovo issue held a prominent position among the acute crisis hotspots in the Balkans, a region that had long been neglected and marginalized (Simić 2000, 20). In 1989, the Serbian government revoked Kosovo's autonomy, further intensifying the crisis. Soon, the issue of Kosovo became central in international diplomacy. The U.S.A. and NATO increasingly framed the crisis as a human rights concern, advocating intervention under the pretext of "humanitarian intervention". This approach was seen by some analysts as part of a broader Western strategy to reshape the post-Cold War international order, particularly in the Balkans. On the other side, according to the NATO Commander, General Wesley Clark, the intervention was a case of coercive diplomacy – the use of armed force aimed at imposing political will on the FRY, specifically on Serbia (Clark 2001, 418).

Following the Račak incident, an unsuccessful round of negotiations took place in Rambouillet.<sup>8</sup> These peace talks, organized under the auspices of the Contact group and led by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, aimed to resolve the escalating conflict. However, the negotiations functioned more as an ultimatum than a diplomatic process. The proposed agreement offered Kosovo broad autonomy within the FRY, including a potential future referendum on its final status. A detailed analysis of the Yugoslav/Serbian delegation and the Kosovo Albanian delegation will not be presented here, as this topic has already been extensively covered by numerous authors (Spirou 2021; Kovačević 2004; Hudson 2003; Rastoder and Adžić 2020). In brief, while the Kosovo Albanian delegation accepted the proposed terms, the Serbian side, under Milošević, rejected the plan without consulting or including Montenegro. Although Montenegro did not take part in the negotiations, it expressed concern regarding its status within the federal structure. NATO's bombing campaign against the FRY lasted 78 days, from March 24<sup>th</sup> to June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999. Montenegro's territory remained largely

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<sup>8</sup> Whereas Priština refers to the incident as "massacre", the officials in Belgrade consider it to be an "anti-terrorist action" (MoD 2019).

unaffected, except for the Murino incident in April 1999, where six civilians were killed, including children (Softić 2024). On June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, NATO troops entered Kosovo following the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement. Whereas the campaign was internationally justified as a humanitarian intervention, aimed at “stopping ethnic cleansing”, in practice it resulted in the marginalization of Serbian rule over the province and the migration of the majority of Kosovo Serbs towards Central Serbia, and a minor part towards Montenegro. In addition, Camp Bondsteel, one of the largest U.S. military regional bases, was established in Kosovo (Kuto 2013, 7).

### **Challenges of the Union: The Fall of Milošević and the Turn Toward Montenegrin Sovereignty**

The union between Serbia and Montenegro, based on common cultural and historical heritage, was formally established by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1992, known as the ‘Žabljak Constitution’. It was an attempt to preserve a joint statehood between Serbia and Montenegro after the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). From its inception, this new federal entity faced serious internal and external challenges. In fact, on the international front, the FRY remained excluded from major international organizations, including the United Nations and the Council of Europe. Also, it was subjected to heavy economic sanctions by the international community, due to wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, the period between 1992 and 2000 was marked by increasing centralization of power in Belgrade, alongside growing political distancing by Montenegro, especially after Đukanović rose to power in the late 1990s. By the end of that decade, Montenegro had begun charting its own Western-oriented course, introducing the German mark as a parallel currency and gradually adopting a more sovereigntist political discourse.

To be more precise, by 1999, Montenegro had significantly distanced itself from Belgrade, asserting autonomy: politically by refusing to support the Yugoslav army during the Kosovo conflict and economically, through the adoption of the German mark to gain monetary independence. Ironically, this separation deepened after Serbia’s democratic transition in 2000, as the DPS

was no longer seen as the primary pro-Western actor. Thus, the reintegration of Serbia into the international community faced major obstacles: unclear relations with Montenegro, the unresolved Kosovo issue and obligations to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). These problems hindered both sides and their aspirations, as Montenegro's path remained entangled with Serbia's challenges, particularly the ongoing Kosovo dispute, which continued to influence Serbo-Montenegrin relations even after Montenegro became an independent country (Petrović 2019, 24-25; Vučković and Petrović 2022, 62). Also, one of the clearest expressions of Montenegro's political divergence and distance from Belgrade that became apparent by 1999 was its boycott of federal institutions, which began in 1998 following the electoral victory of the DPS. Montenegrin representatives withdrew from the work of the Federal Assembly and other federal bodies, effectively suspending the republic's institutional participation in the joint state. This boycott included the period of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Despite formally being part of the FRY, Montenegro avoided military confrontation with the West and acted as a *de facto* neutral republic/territory during the conflict. Its relationship with Belgrade deteriorated further during this time. Although Montenegro never formally declared independence, its actions increasingly reflected a functional separation from the federal structure.

It is relevant to mention that, during the protracted negotiation process in Rambouillet, the seat of Montenegro remained vacant. This symbolically underscored the republic's subordinate position within the Milošević regime and reflected the increasingly adversarial relationship between the FRY and the broader international community, regarding the Kosovo issue (Rastoder and Adžić 2020). Nevertheless, the global public was informed that Montenegro had expressed a willingness to accept the proposed agreement. However, it lacked the authority and the capacity to make binding decisions. Former Member of Parliament, Miodrag Vuković emphasized that any final agreement reached in Rambouillet "must not call into question the legal order of Montenegro", warning that any such outcome would signify "the end of the existing Yugoslavia" (Đuranović 1999, 10-11).

Although Montenegro was not the central subject of the peace conference, its future was closely tied to its outcomes. The Montenegrin ruling elite expressed concerns regarding the republic's status within the

federation, particularly amid speculation that Kosovo might be granted the status of a federal unit within the FRY. In a telephone conversation between the chief negotiator, U.S. Secretary Albright and President Đukanović, assurances were given that Montenegro's interests would be safeguarded by the international community. This position was later reaffirmed by representatives of Western powers, following direct discussions with President Đukanović. It was promised that no solution presented at the negotiation table would compromise Montenegro's status or its equality within the federation (Rastoder and Adžić 2020, 1309-1310).

The political elite in Montenegro emphasized their situation during the NATO intervention, pointing to the fact that there were fewer human casualties and less material destruction on Montenegrin territory. However, if we take an objective look at the situation at that time, it becomes clear that the international community, led by the U.S., was primarily focused on removing Milošević from power. Since Đukanović had already distanced himself from Milošević beforehand, he was not seen as a primary target. Otherwise, the pressure would have extended to him as well, as stated by Prof. Dr. Dejan Jović in an interview on July 13, 2023 (Šorović 2024, 164).<sup>9</sup>

During Milošević's rule, the possibility of Yugoslavia joining the European integration process was virtually non-existent. The wars and political turmoil of the 1990s pushed it far from the European path (Dragojlović et al. 2011, 279). As the European Union (EU) introduced a regional approach and launched the stabilization and association process for post-Yugoslav countries, Yugoslavia faced NATO bombing in 1999. In the midst of the crisis, the Federal Assembly of Yugoslavia sought an alternative solution – declaring the country's accession to a union with Russia and Belarus (Đukanović 2019, 126). In a striking speech to the Federal Assembly, then-Prime Minister Momir Bulatović declared that NATO's aggression was not just an attack on Yugoslavia, but on the very foundations of international law. He framed the alliance with Russia and Belarus as historically significant – a unification in defense of peace, national interest and future development. Though largely symbolic, the speech reflected a deeper search for allies beyond the West, at

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<sup>9</sup> This political observation presented in this article is based on an interview with Professor Dejan Jović, conducted by the author during the research for her doctoral dissertation.

a time when Yugoslavia found itself increasingly isolated. This idea of forming a union with Russia and Belarus carried no real political weight. It was neither accepted nor implemented (Dragojlović et al. 2011, 284-285).

Milošević's regime was marked by authoritarianism cloaked in democratic elements, a form of rule best described as "caesarism" (Darmanović 2002, 179-180).<sup>10</sup> Although Serbia formally transitioned from a one-party to a multi-party system, these reforms were superficial and lacked genuine democratization. As the famous Tocqueville warned, continuity with authoritarian traditions often gives rise to new forms of despotism (Podunavac 2018, 66). Milošević maintained power through nationalism, manipulating historical myths and capitalizing on crises, such as the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.<sup>11</sup> Each conflict marked a distinct phase of his regime: from its rise and consolidation (1991-1995), through stagnation (1995-1998), to eventual collapse (1998-2000). His exploitation of state institutions for personal and political gain, particularly the militarization of the police and erosion of federal structures, led scholars to characterize the final phase of his rule as "sultanistic" (Darmanović 2002, 178-185).<sup>12</sup> The NATO intervention in 1999 dealt a serious blow to Milošević's regime. Although he managed to stay in power in the aftermath, the opposition began to consolidate, bolstered by growing support from the West. In 2000, the

<sup>10</sup> It is a negative form of political regime that, unlike other types such as tyranny, dictatorship or autocracy, is characterized by a ruler attempting to lend their authoritarian rule a semblance of democratic political legitimacy.

<sup>11</sup> Milošević rose to power amid political unrest by portraying himself as the protector of the Serbs. He invoked national myths and historical grievances to fuel ethno-nationalist sentiment and legitimize his rule. Promising a more prosperous socialism, he reshaped public values and gained popularity as trust in elites declined. His opposition to police violence in Kosovo Polje in 1987 further boosted his image as the unquestioned leader of the Serbian people (Čolović 1997, 41-48; Šorović 2024, 168-169; Fišer 2009, 489-525; Vladislavljević 2020, 206).

<sup>12</sup> As Milošević consolidated power, he ruled through repression, dismantled institutions and centralized control in the presidency. He extended his influence beyond Serbia, weakening federal structures and shifting from authoritarian to personalist, "sultanistic" rule. Rising tensions over Kosovo and the NATO intervention further isolated his regime. In response, repression deepened, with loyalists placed in key roles and opposition suppressed. His rule ended on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000, after a popular uprising (Darmanović 2002, 180-185; Šorović 2024, 169-170).



Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije*, DOS) was formed with backing from the U.S.A. and the EU, uniting a broad coalition behind a single presidential candidate, Vojislav Koštunica. He was viewed as a moderate nationalist, a critical opponent of Milošević and foreign interference. Koštunica emerged as a compromise figure – acceptable to domestic voters wary of the West, yet also palatable to international actors seeking regime change (Vladisavljević 2020, 9). Following the disputed elections in September 2000, mass protests on October 5th led to the collapse of Milošević's regime. Security forces largely stood down, refusing to suppress the demonstrators. Under mounting pressure, Milošević conceded defeat and Koštunica was officially recognized as the new president.

An important factor in Milošević's downfall was Montenegro's political shift away from Belgrade. Led by Đukanović, Montenegro began distancing itself from Serbian control after 1997, embracing cooperation with the West. The republic became a haven for opposition forces and moved toward independence, despite EU and U.S. efforts to preserve the Yugoslav federation. Following Milošević's fall, Serbia began a gradual process of democratization and re-engagement with the international community. Yet this transition was not driven solely from within. The West used the elections (2000) to achieve through political means what military intervention had not - regime change in Belgrade and Serbia's alignment with the neoliberal, post-Cold War order.

Throughout Milošević's rule, Montenegro was searching for a different solution. Recognizing the growing political rift with Serbia, it proposed a peaceful dissolution of the Yugoslav federation, modeled after the split of Czechoslovakia, envisioning the creation of a new union between two internationally recognized states, Serbia and Montenegro. This proposal received little support. The international community, especially the EU and the U.S., viewed Montenegro as a potential destabilizer, labeling it a "troublemaker", while official Belgrade was equally dismissive. Once seen as a pillar of regional stability, Montenegro in that period became a source of concern (Darmanović 2001).

The democratic changes in Serbia after October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000 and the rise of the pro-reform government led by Zoran Đinđić marked a new phase in the federal dynamics. Ironically, although Montenegro had until then been

perceived as the “more democratic” part of the federation, democratic reforms in Serbia somewhat eclipsed this image. At the same time, a reformed Serbia began pushing for a redefinition of relations within the federation, resulting in the new state formation between Serbia and Montenegro. Hence, in the early 2000s, the international community showed little support for Montenegro’s push for independence. This reluctance was largely due to the greater priority of the time, stabilizing and promoting democratic transformation in Serbia, the region’s largest and most influential country. Additionally, there were concerns that supporting Montenegro’s secession could encourage Kosovo to pursue its own independence more aggressively. In order to manage this situation, a breakthrough came through EU mediation. On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the Belgrade Agreement (*Beogradski sporazum*) was signed, establishing the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (*Državna zajednica Srbija i Crna Gora*), a temporary arrangement between two semi-independent entities. This union was set to last for three years (owing to the three-year moratorium) after which either republic had the right to hold a referendum on full independence. This period was used by Montenegro to transfer powers to its authorities, prepare for a potential referendum and simultaneously begin UN-led negotiations between Belgrade and Priština over the political status of Kosovo. As a result, the political processes in Montenegro and Kosovo became closely intertwined, despite the fact that Kosovo was officially part of Serbia, while Montenegro was a separate federal unit (Vučković and Petrović 2022, 63).

However, the new Union was more a symbolic framework than a functional federation. Over the following years, Montenegro continued building its own state institutions. Although Montenegro’s status was often linked in international discourse to the Kosovo issue, it is important to note that there was always a clear legal basis for Montenegrin independence, unlike the case of Kosovo, which has remained legally and politically contested in the international arena. Though brief and vague in its wording, the agreement implied a high degree of Montenegrin autonomy, most notably in areas such as currency, customs, trade policy and even diplomatic representations. In essence, the union functioned more as a formal construct than a cohesive state, with limited coordination between its constituent parts. Still, the very “temporary clause” in the agreement laid the legal groundwork

for Montenegro's 2006 referendum on independence. Despite international hopes for rebuilding a joint state, the structure put in place pointed clearly toward eventual separation (Šorović 2024, 179). The process of independence culminated on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006, in the referendum, in which 55.5% of voters supported independence. The joint statehood ended between Montenegro and Serbia, which was marked by many tensions, redefinitions and diverging visions regarding the country's internal structure, international positioning and future.

## **The Definition of a New Foreign Policy Concept**

When objectively examining the period of this research (1997–2000), it is important to acknowledge that there was significant domestic resistance in Montenegro to Euro-Atlantic integration. Nevertheless, this strategic orientation secured strong international support for the country - support that was not merely diplomatic or rooted in the provision of external legitimacy. Rather, it represented a vital financial lifeline, particularly during the rule of Slobodan Milošević.<sup>13</sup> This assistance enabled the Montenegrin leadership to consolidate power and build a robust police force capable of resisting the Yugoslav Army, which remained stationed on Montenegrin territory and under Milošević's command (Marović 2018).<sup>14</sup>

In 1997, the political elite in Montenegro aligned itself with the EU and the U.S.A., initially as a form of opposition to the Milošević regime and later through cooperation within the ICTY. This alignment continued with Montenegro's support for independence in Kosovo (2008) and culminated in the country's accession to NATO in 2017. Each of those political decisions

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<sup>13</sup> At the time, support for the regime was sustained through cigarette and drug smuggling, involving top government officials and organized crime networks that still affect Montenegro and our region. Also, informal and poorly regulated financial flows helped maintain power by fueling a widespread clientelist system.

<sup>14</sup> During the NATO intervention, the Yugoslav and Montenegrin forces were effectively on opposing sides. The Milošević regime tried to force Montenegro into submission through mobilization against the population's will and by cracking down on critics, particularly educated and dissenting voices (Rastoder and Adžić 2020, 1313).

reflects a clear pattern of Montenegro's foreign policy orientation toward the EU, even when doing so meant opposing major global actors, particularly Russia. The historically close and friendly ties between Montenegro and Russia, which date back to 1711, are beyond the scope of this discussion, though they remain a relevant backdrop to the country's geopolitical choices (Biber 2020, 66). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, many in Serbian politics and academia rejected the idea that Montenegro has a distinct identity or future separate from Serbia. This belief was strongly supported by Milošević's regime, which viewed Montenegrin autonomy with distrust; however, this distrust did not end with the fall of Milošević and continued to a certain degree with Vojislav Koštunica. Although the Constitution of the FRY promised equal status for Serbia and Montenegro, the reality was different. Montenegro was treated as the junior partner and federal institutions served to extend Belgrade's control. As a result, Montenegro began building its own political and institutional independence during the late 1990s.

After the democratic shift on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000, Serbia's new government focused on internal reforms, but largely ignored the federal relationship. Earlier in the 1990s, Montenegrin leaders like Bulatović and Đukanović had supported Milošević. He was the one who supported them in coming to power. But, by the late 1990s, Montenegro started moving in a different direction, turning toward Europe, diplomacy and away from the nationalism and isolationism still dominant in Belgrade. Montenegro increasingly perceived the federal system as flawed and unworkable. It lacked decentralization, legal balance and true power-sharing. Foreign affairs, for instance, were almost always controlled by Serbian officials aligned with the regime, with brief exceptions like Goran Svilanović and Vuk Drašković, who, despite being more moderate, were nonetheless Serbian appointees. While Montenegro pursued regional cooperation and Euro-Atlantic integration, Serbia remained stuck in a post-conflict and anti-Western mindset, especially immediately following the NATO bombing. These divergent paths deepened the rift between the two republics, which continued to affect their relations even after the democratic changes in Serbia and its enhanced cooperation with the European Union.

## Conclusion

This article presents the political transformation of Montenegro from 1997 to 2000, a critical juncture in the post-Yugoslav space. The period was marked by the internal fragmentation of the DPS, the gradual detachment from Serbia and the redefinition of Montenegrin state identity. The evolution of the DPS was of particular interest to academic observation. The political transformations it underwent were significant: the party initially emerged as the successor of the Communist Party in Montenegro, then shifted to a nationalist stance, later adopted a reform-oriented agenda and eventually became a pro-European political force. In line with the aforementioned developments, the DPS illustrates the adaptability and strategic pragmatism that enabled it to maintain dominance for decades. However, this dominance was not solely the result of electoral success, but of entrenched mechanisms of patronage, institutional control and the manipulation of identity narratives.

The ideological and political split between Milo Đukanović and Slobodan Milošević marked a fundamental shift in domestic and foreign policy orientations of Montenegro. By rejecting militarization and embracing diplomacy during the Kosovo crisis, the Montenegrin leadership positioned itself as a relatively autonomous actor within the FRY, despite formal constitutional constraints. This period exposed the limitations of federalism in the Yugoslav context, revealing the asymmetry of power and the lack of substantive autonomy within the structures of the FRY. Through the lens of constructivist international relations theory, Montenegro's redefinition of its identity and foreign policy is best understood as a process shaped by discursive practices, shifting narratives of self and other and the strategic reframing of sovereignty. The interplay between identity politics, federal dysfunction and crisis diplomacy highlights how small states can navigate and reshape their geopolitical space during periods of upheaval.

Ultimately, since its independence in 2006, Montenegro has pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, marked by NATO membership in 2017 and continued progress toward EU accession. However, this trajectory has been complicated by deep-rooted historical, cultural and religious connections and recent past with Serbia. These ties frequently influence public opinion and political discourse, creating internal divisions between pro-Western and pro-

Serbian (and often pro-Russian) factions. Also, tensions between Podgorica and Belgrade have periodically surfaced, particularly as Montenegro has sought to assert an independent foreign policy stance. Domestically, polarization over national identity and foreign alignment challenges the consistency and credibility of Montenegro's international positioning.

This case study demonstrates that Montenegro's path toward sovereignty was neither linear nor inevitable. It was shaped by contested visions within the ruling elite, external geopolitical pressures and the ability of key actors, particularly Đukanović, to reinterpret the meaning of nationhood and political legitimacy. The period from 1997 to 2000 thus laid the ideological and institutional foundations for Montenegro's eventual independence, positioning the DPS as a beneficiary and an architect of a newly imagined political order. However, Montenegro's foreign policy remains a key indicator of broader regional dynamics in the Western Balkans. As the country navigates between competing influences, its choices will have significant implications for regional stability and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. This enduring tension underscores the continued relevance of examining Montenegro's foreign policy direction.

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**EVOLUCIJA SPOLJNE POLITIKE CRNE GORE: IZMEĐU SRBIJE I ZAPADA**

**Apstrakt:** Ovaj članak proučava crnogorsku političku i spoljnopolitičku transformaciju u periodu između 1997. i 2000. godine, fokusirajući se na njen postepeni zaokret u odnosu na usklađivanje sa Srbijom, ka sve nezavisnijoj međunarodnoj orijentaciji. Hipoteza je da je do ove promene došlo usled uvođenja unutrašnjih političkih promena i razvojem crnogorskog identiteta kao zasebnog političkog aktera, oblikovanog ključnim regionalnim događajima, kao što su kosovsko pitanje i NATO intervencija. Istraživanje se oslanja na tri teorijska okvira: konstruktivizam, koji ističe ulogu identiteta i političke naracije prilikom oblikovanja spoljne politike; federalizam koji objašnjava unutrašnje tenzije; i teorije koje se bave načinima na koje male države manevrišu u složenim regionalnim konfliktima kako bi očuvale svoju autonomiju. Cilj istraživanja je razumeti kako su unutrašnji i međunarodni faktori međusobno isprepleteni u redefinisaju diplomatskog ponašanja i strateških izbora Crne Gore. Korišćena je kvalitativna, istorijsko-analitička metodologija, koja se oslanja na primarne i sekundarne izvore kako bi se ispratila ova evolucija. Istraživanje pokazuje da crnogorski zaokret nije bio samo reaktivan, već dio šire redefinicije njenog identiteta i spoljne politike, čime su postavljeni temelji za budući put ka državnosti i međunarodnom priznanju.

**Ključne reči:** Crna Gora, Srbija, Jugoslavija, Demokratska partija socijalista, Milo Đukanović, diplomatija.