

THE ROLE OF MONTENEGRO IN THE WARS OF THE 1990s: "FROM A CONSISTENT WARRIOR TO AN (UN)WILLING ALLY"

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MONTENEGRO AND THE WAR IN CROATIA (1991-1995)

As it was not an independent subject of international law, Socialist Republic of Montenegro (SR) formally and legally ‘did not participate’ in the war that took place in Croatia (1991-1995). However, realistically, in fact, it *was* a participant in that war of aggression.

The authorities in SR Montenegro and its representatives in Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) during the period 1990-1991, as well as its official representatives and actors in the new state of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) from april 1992 onwards, supported the Serbian political and armed uprising in Croatia, adhering to the Greater Serbia war concept of ‘all Serbs in one state’. They promoted a policy based on the plan according to which a large part of the territories, i.e. the state space of the Republic of Croatia which officially declared independence on 25 June 1991, significantly inhabited by the Serb population, should be separated and amputated from Croatia, and that it should in the future become an integral part of the territory of the projected, reduced ‘truncated Yugoslavia’. The political leadership of SR Montenegro and its representatives in the government of SFRY, and later FRY, supported, just like Serbia, and in many ways enormously helped both the creation and the several years of functioning of a parastatal creation. It was the so-called ‘Republic of Serbian Krajina’, which was forcibly established in the territory of the Republic of Croatia, regardless of the fact that it was an internationally recognised state that later became a member of the UN.

Realisation of the Greater Serbia unification project, or gathering under the same state roof of the ‘Serbian ethnic space’, which implied territorial fragmentation of the Republic of Croatia, involved active military participation of the YNA since mid-1991, i.e. its leadership and the forces that were under its command and control. In that sense, the general military, offensive ‘Operation Dubrovnik’ began on 1 October 1991, and was launched from the territory of the Socialist Republic of Montenegro as well as from Herzegovina (part of SR BiH). It began with the YNA attack on the area of Konavle and the entire Dubrovnik region, and was followed by an attack on the city of Dubrovnik. Although not officially, Montenegro had been at war with Croatia since 1 October 1991, despite the fact that its official republic bodies denied it.

More than 7,000 mobilised citizens of Montenegro took part in the war operation. Citizens went to war *en masse*, outside the borders of Montenegro, taking part in the attack on the Republic of Croatia, which had declared independence three months earlier. Organised by and under the orders of the General Staff of the YNA and other structures of government, power and influence, citizens of Montenegro were mobilised into the YNA and the volunteer units placed under its command, into the Territorial Defence of Montenegro, but also – partly – into the armed formations of the Special Republic Police Forces of the Government of the Republic

of Montenegro. Based on the way in which it was executed and the consequences it had caused, 'Operation Dubrovnik' was a conquest-oriented, destructive and plundering campaign that took place in the Republic of Croatia, specifically in the Dubrovnik area, despite the fact that the leadership of SR Montenegro, or the YNA, had never officially declared war on Croatia. On the contrary, the political elite of Montenegro claimed that Montenegro was not at war, which was something that did not correspond to the facts. On 2 October 1991, together with army representatives, the main representatives of the authorities in Montenegro, that is, its republic bodies, officially gave full support to the YNA leadership, i.e. the Supreme Command Staff and its war operations in Croatia, especially concerning the Dubrovnik-Herzegovina front.

The decision to engage the YNA in the war in Croatia (1991) was not made by the legal and legitimate Presidency of the SFRY, which was the only competent constitutional body and the supreme commander of the army. This body was under a blockade as half of its full members had either left it or were boycotting its work. The SFRY presidency was thus illegitimate, blocked and unable to make a constitutional and legal decision on the use of the YNA in armed conflicts in Croatia. However, the 'truncated' Presidency of the SFRY, composed of four members under the control of the President of SR Serbia Slobodan Milošević (among whom was also the representative of Montenegro, Dr. Branko Kostić),¹ took a decision to engage the YNA. This truncated body, illegally and illegitimately, also made the decision to declare a state of imminent danger of war in the country. The leadership of Montenegro, headed by the President of the Presidency, Momir Bulatović, *de facto* agreed with that decision.

The decision to engage the YNA in the war in Croatia, and especially in the military operations on the Dubrovnik-Herzegovina front, was made by the YNA leadership headed by the SFRY Federal Secretary for National Defence, General Veljko Kadijević and the YNA Chief of General Staff, Colonel-General Blagoje Adžić. The Leadership of republics Serbia and Montenegro and their representatives in the truncated Presidency of the SFRY (Dr Borislav Jović on behalf of Serbia, Dr Branko Kostić on behalf of Montenegro, Jugoslav Kostić on behalf of Vojvodina and Sejdo Bajramović on behalf of Kosovo, all under the control of Milošević) *de facto* knew of and agreed with said decision. Namely, Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević had gained full control over the YNA military leadership in mid-1991, and Montenegro and its leadership were by then in the jaws of his policy and under his patronage.

As regards the military offensive in the south of Croatia (Dubrovnik and its territory), the President of the Presidency of the Republic of Montenegro Momir Bulatović later claimed that he had been deceived by the Federal Secretary for the Defence of SFRY General Veljko Kadijević, the main actor at the top of the YNA, and his subordinates. He claimed that they told him that "*30,000 Ustashas were waiting on the Croatian side of the border with Montenegro, preparing to attack Montenegro.*" That information was incorrect. Soldiers and reservists from Montenegro and other areas, who were part of the Second Operational Group of the YNA, which was under the command of General Pavle Strugar (before this, he was the commander of the Territorial Defence of Montenegro) were visited in Cavtat during the military operations on the Dubrovnik-Herzegovina battlefield, on 13 October 1991, by the President of the Presidency of

¹ Dr. Branko Kostić was a member from the middle of May 1991, and then the vice president of the Presidency of the SFRY. From 6 December 1991 to 15 June 1992, he was acting President of the "truncated" Presidency of the SFRY, when that function was abolished because the new state of the FRY, the federal union of Serbia and Montenegro, was created on 27 April 1992. The first president of FRY, Dobrica Ćosić, was elected on 15 June. Until then, that is, until the election of Dobrica Ćosić as the first president of the FRY, Dr. Branko Kostić formally performed the duty of the first man of the new joint state of Montenegro and Serbia - the FRY. He was nominally the commander-in-chief of the rest of the YNA, which was transformed into the Yugoslav Army (YA) on 20 May 1992, as the armed force of the FRY.

the Socialist Republic of Montenegro, Momir Bulatović, and a member of the Presidency of the SFRY, Dr. Branko Kostić. On that occasion, they gave full support to their military command.

During the 1991 war in Croatia, the Montenegrin republic leadership showed certain - although limited - degree of disagreement with the actions of the YNA leadership and the SFRY Minister of Defence, General Kadijević. This was especially evident when a large number of YNA soldiers and reservists were taken from the army barracks in Montenegro to the front in Banija (Dvor na Uni). They were used to man the YNA units that were incomplete due to the failed mobilisation in Serbia and the desertion of some YNA members from that battlefield. Contrary to the will of the authorities in Montenegro, and without an agreement with them, more than 1,000 soldiers from Montenegro were taken to the Banija battlefield (in Croatia). Partly under pressure from family members of the taken soldiers, the Montenegrin leadership publicly asked them at the end of October 1991 to leave the units and return to Montenegro, which is what later gradually happened.

During the first stage of the war in Croatia (1991), not all Montenegrins who served in or were part of the command structures of the YNA were in favour of the war against it. The captain of battleship Boka, Rear Admiral Krsto L. Đurović, was against the capture of Čilipi, the destruction of the Dubrovnik area, the war campaign and the siege of Dubrovnik. He lost his life in Konavle on 5 October 1991, under still unexplained circumstances. Numerous pieces of evidence show that he was killed in a helicopter, or during a helicopter's forced landing in the area of Konavle, by YNA personnel who were ordered to do so because of Đurović's disagreement with the politics, plans and actions of the YNA and its political mentors regarding the attacks on Čilipi and the aggression against the city of Dubrovnik. Prior to the death of Rear Admiral Krsto Đurović, YNA Admiral Vladimir Barović (a Montenegrin) also refused the order of his superiors to bomb Dalmatian cities. In the capacity of Deputy Commander of the Naval District of Split, instead of executing the order to demolish Dalmatian cities, he committed suicide on 29 September 1991, on the island of Vis. In the suicide note, he wrote that he finds the YNA aggression against Croatia an act that is contrary to the Montenegrin honour, and that he refuses to participate in it.

In Montenegro, especially from the middle of 1991 (well before the war 'Operation Dubrovnik' began on 1 October 1991), a terrible and permanent war-mongering propaganda campaign was carried out by the then only republic media source - the Montenegrin Television. On the other hand, during the war in Croatia, especially during the offensive on the Dubrovnik area and the frequent shelling of the city of Dubrovnik, the anti-war movement of the minority, civil, 'other Montenegro' was very active, gathered behind the maxim "*Heroism means not to go to war*". The movement consisted of several state-building, sovereignist parliamentary Montenegrin political parties, as well as some independent print media (the „Monitor” weekly) and a small number of alternative associations of writers, journalists and important intellectuals. At a rally in favour of a sovereign and independent Montenegro, organised by the Liberal Alliance (LSCG) on 1 February 1992 in Cetinje, the united Montenegrin state-building, sovereignist and anti-war opposition sent a clear message through a song performed by tens of thousands of gathered citizens: "*From Mt. Lovćen a fairy shouts: Forgive us, Dubrovnik*". The rally was a gathering of the united Montenegrin anti-war, sovereignist, parliamentary (and to a lesser extent extra-parliamentary), democratic and civil opposition, led by LSCG and other members of the Alliance of Reform Forces for Montenegro (composed of several parties that would later, after the 1993 unification, make up SDP CG, and part of the Democratic Coalition, that is, representatives of the Democratic Alliance in Montenegro, etc.).

Citizens of Montenegro died and were wounded in the war in Croatia (1991-1995), not only on the Dubrovnik-Herzegovina battlefield, but also on the Slavonian front (Vukovar) and in other parts of Croatia. Among those killed on these fronts were volunteers from Montenegro who

served in the YNA, but also those who operated within paramilitary formations from Serbia and Montenegro in Slavonia, Knin, Baranja, Banija and other battlefields along the Danube and in other areas of Croatia (these were primarily volunteer formations of the People's Party of Montenegro, as well as paramilitary formations in which Montenegrin citizens also participated: "Serbian Guard", SPO - Vuk Draskovic; citizens of Montenegro who volunteered in the units of the Serbian Radical Party of Dr. Vojislav Šešelj; members of the "Serbian Volunteer Guard" from Montenegro – "Tigers" of Željko Ražnatović Arkan; members of the "White Eagles" from Montenegro; the formation of Mirko Jović's and Dragoslav Bokan's (both from Serbia) Serbian National Renewal; and members of the (semi)paramilitary "Red Berets" (formerly known as Captain Dragan Vasiljković's "Knindžas"). Essentially, all these were units of the Serbian State Security who fought in the wars in Croatia, Bosnia, etc.

In 1991 and 1992, 165 Montenegrin citizens who served in the YNA were killed on the Dubrovnik-Herzegovina front. Another 236 were wounded. In Montenegro and the FRY, they later received the status of war invalids. It is also important to point out that 14 citizens of Montenegro, who participated in the war as soldiers and reservists of the YNA, were brutally tortured and killed as prisoners of war by Croatian armed groups and by the authorities in the military investigation centre - the Lora camp near Split. This also occurred in other locations in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991 and 1992, where a significant number of detainees were tortured but have managed to survive. Out of a total of 14 murdered soldiers and reservists from Montenegro, the remains of 12 had been found. They were tortured and killed in the Lora camp and were discovered in several locations in BiH.

Due to the war in Croatia and the violation of the Geneva Conventions, the war law and the humanitarian law, the UN Hague Tribunal sentenced the YNA Colonel General Pavle Strugar to seven and a half years in prison. A Montenegrin, he was first the commander of the Territorial Defence of Montenegro, and then Commander of the Operational Zone on the Dubrovnik-Herzegovina front, under the command of the General Staff of the YNA from Belgrade (to which he was subordinated). The Hague Tribunal also convicted Admiral Miodrag Jokić, a citizen of the Republic of Serbia and the former Army Minister, later commander of the YNA Navy and the battleship Boka during the attack on the Dubrovnik area and the city of Dubrovnik. He pleaded guilty before the Hague Tribunal, and was also sentenced to seven years in prison. The Prosecution of the Hague Tribunal also filed an indictment for the war crime of civilian suffering etc. in relation to the shelling of the old town of Dubrovnik, against the YNA Captain Vladimir Kovačević-Rambo from Nikšić. He was taken to court in The Hague, but it was decided that he was unable to stand trial due to mental insanity. The Hague Prosecution did not file an indictment against any civilians or public officials from Montenegro for participation in the war in the Dubrovnik area (1991-1992).

During the war in Croatia, war crimes also took place on the territory of Montenegro. Namely, in the town of Morinj (Bay of Kotor), a collection centre (camp) for prisoners from the Dubrovnik battlefield operated from October 1991 until the second half of 1992. *There were more than 300 prisoners of war in this camp, under the control of the YNA, i.e. its officers at that time. They were soldiers and civilians from the Dubrovnik battlefield, many of whom were subjected to inhuman treatment, torture and starvation.* On 31 July 2013, the High Court in Podgorica sentenced four persons from Montenegro to a total of 12 years in prison for war crimes committed in the Morinj camp. On 22 April 2014, this verdict was upheld by the Court of Appeals of Montenegro.

At the end of 1991 and in the course of 1992, the European Community and the United Nations tried, through numerous peace initiatives and mediation, to end the war in Croatia. The leadership of Serbia, led by Slobodan Milošević, the leadership of Montenegro, led by Momir Bulatović, and the 'truncated' (illegitimate, illegal) presidency of the SFRY led by the Acting

President Branko Kostić, all agreed with Vance's plan. The SFRY presidency was composed of four members (representatives of Serbia, Montenegro and Milosević's people from Vojvodina and Kosovo) and had only a formal (façade) civilian command over the illegitimate YNA, which was still led by Kadijević and Adžić. However, it should be noted that the leadership of the rest of the YNA behaved autonomously and arbitrarily on many occasions during the war, and that it was mostly under the influence and control of Slobodan Milošević and Borislav Jović. After the adoption of the aforementioned UN peace plan with the aim of ending the war in Croatia, that is, the Security Council Resolution no. 743, UN peacekeepers arrived in Croatian protected zones. Vance's peace plan foresaw the withdrawal of the YNA from Croatia based on the agreement that was reached in Geneva between the President of the FRY, Academician Dobrica Ćosić, and the President of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, on 30 September 1992, with the mediation of the international community. The YNA – since May 1992, the Army of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (YA) – was forced to implement the provisions of that agreement. It withdrew from the territory of Croatia, and consequently from the Dubrovnik region and the Prevlaka area. The YNA/YA siege of southern Croatia thus ended on 20 October 1992. The Prevlaka area was demilitarised and placed under the jurisdiction of UN observers, whose mandate was later extended for several years. But the war in Croatia lasted until the first days of August 1995, until the end of the military-police operation of the Republic of Croatia known as "Storm", which ended in victory for the Croatian Armed Forces. The para-state creation known as the Republic of Srpska Krajina (RSK) fell and disappeared, after which more than 180,000 Serbs left and were expelled from that part of Croatia. In relation to the fall of the RSK, the Supreme Defence Council of the FRY, of which President of the Republic of Montenegro Momir Bulatović was a full member, was of the unanimous opinion that the army and other armed formations of RSK should resist the operation "Storm", after which the YA would militarily intervene on the Serb side 'in defence of Krajina'. However, since Serbs in Krajina and their armed forces all but failed to resist the Croatian army and police, the FRY (YA) decided not to intervene, that is, not to enter into an armed conflict with Croatia.

The war in Croatia definitely and formally ended on 12 November 1995, when the *Erdut Agreement* was signed by the representatives of Croatia and the local Serb community in Croatia, with the mediation of US Ambassador Peter Galbraith and UN mediator Torvald Stoltenberg. The negotiating parties agreed to the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region – which, several years earlier, had been under Serbian control - into the Republic of Croatia. The Serbian minority was guaranteed national, political, civil and other minority rights. The authorities in the FRY, i.e. Serbia and Montenegro agreed with the text and dynamics of the implementation of the *Erdut Agreement*.

At an official meeting with the President of the Republic of Croatia Stjepan Mesić, held in Cavtat on 26 June 2000, Milo Djukanović, President of the Republic of Montenegro at the time when it was part of the FRY, expressed regret and apologised to Croatia and the Croatian people for the participation of Montenegro and its citizens in the war attacks on the Dubrovnik region and the city of Dubrovnik that lasted from the beginning of October 1991 until October 1992. On that occasion (2000), President of the Republic of Montenegro said the following: "I would like to take the opportunity to express my sincere regret to all citizens of the Republic of Croatia, and particularly to the citizens of the Dubrovnik and Dubrovnik-Neretva counties, on my own behalf and on behalf of the citizens of Montenegro - especially those who share my moral and broad political convictions - for all the pain, all the suffering and all the material

losses that were inflicted upon them by any Montenegrin members of the YNA in the course of those tragic events”.²

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² **For additional information about this, see:** Prof. Dr. Šerbo Rastoder and M.Sc. Novak Adžić, “Modern History of Montenegro 1988-2017 - From the Coup to the NATO pact”, Volume III, “Vijesti”, Podgorica, 2020, pp. 1,434-1,435.