

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 KOSOVO (1998-1999)

To understand the conflict over Kosovo, one should bear in mind that the so-called ‘Kosovo issue’, or the ‘Albanian issue’, has been the focus of the Yugoslav political crisis since the early 1980s. That is when students at the University of Pristina, followed by MPs, presented their request – the Republic of Kosovo, to which Serbia responded by abolishing the autonomy of the province in 1989. By doing this, it reduced the issue to the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo. As a ‘frozen conflict’, the problem remained for twenty years, until it finally exploded into the open armed conflict that took place in 1999.

The war in Kosovo broke out during the conflict of Milo Djukanović and the regime of Slobodan Milošević, in an attempt to deviate from his policies. Although the government in Montenegro supported - until about 1997 - Serbia’s policy towards Kosovo as a province over which complete control needed to be established, a radical turn was made at the time of the outbreak of the armed clash.

Official Montenegro, i.e. its government, refused to take part in the war in Kosovo (1998-1999) and the military conflict of the FRY with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1999. Instead, it insisted on full cooperation with the US, NATO and the European Union. It was in favour of accepting peace plans and proposals that came from the international community regarding the peaceful resolution of the Kosovo crisis and the termination of armed conflicts and the war in Kosovo (1998-1999), which was waged by the Yugoslav Army (VJ) and Serbian paramilitary formations to quell the rebellion of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Kosovo Albanian uprising. The Montenegrin leadership favoured a political solution to the Kosovo issue and did not agree with the policy of the President of FRY Slobodan Milošević. Nevertheless, before the war in Kosovo escalated, at the session of the Supreme Defence Council held on 9 June 1998 in Belgrade, the President of the Republic of Montenegro, Milo Djukanović (who was a member of the SDC) – all this according to Momir Bulatović, who had participated at the meeting in the capacity as Prime Minister of the FRY – allegedly “*voted for the conclusions which assessed that the engagement of the YA in Kosovo and Metohija was in accordance with the Constitution and laws of the country, and supported the armed fight against the terrorist KLA*”¹ President of the Republic of Montenegro, Milo Djukanović, participated at the session of the SDC in Belgrade, held on 4 October 1998, at which he insisted that the FRY

¹ Prof. Šerbo Rastoder and Novak Adžić, “Modern History of Montenegro 1988-2017 - From the Coup to the NATO Pact”, volume III, Vijesti, Podgorica, 2020, pp. 1314-1315.

should in no case confront NATO militarily, that the announced armed conflict and the threatened NATO intervention should be avoided, that the conflict in Kosovo should be resolved politically and through negotiations with the Albanian side and not by armed means, that he was against mobilisation, etc. But – according to the testimony of Momir Bulatović – when asked by Slobodan Milošević “If NATO aggression against the FRY occurs, should we defend the country by all available means?”,² and “Should our army defend our country?”,³ Djukanović, allegedly, orally answered that “It should”.⁴ However, there was no voting at the meeting, and there is no available, original document, with Djukanović’s signature, as evidence that he *had* voted as Bulatović claimed he had. The Montenegrin government was powerless in its constant attempts to influence the Serbian and federal authorities to avoid a violent solution to the Kosovo problem and the FRY’s armed conflict with NATO that followed. The Montenegrin government and part of the parliamentary opposition were supporters of accepting the peace agreement that was offered by the International Contact Group (USA, European Union and Russia) at unsuccessful talks and negotiations in Rambouillet near Paris (6-23 February 1999) and in Paris (15-18 March 1999), where Montenegrin representatives were not present and which were conducted, with the participation of international political and military factors, between the representatives of the Serbian authorities and Kosovo Albanians in an attempt to resolve the Kosovo crisis and stop the war.

The proposed *Rambouillet Peace Agreement* was resolutely rejected by the FRY President Slobodan Milošević and the authorities in Serbia and FRY (without the participation of legitimate representatives of official Montenegro). The armed NATO intervention ensued after the last visit of US peace negotiator Richard Holbrooke, envoy of US President Bill Clinton, to Belgrade on 22 March 1999 and his failed attempt to persuade Milošević to accept US and international contact group terms, suspend the offensive in Kosovo and accept the provisions of the peace plan. The intervention lasted 78 days. NATO aviation bombed military targets located mostly in Serbia, but also those in Montenegro.

The Yugoslav Army (YA) had been constitutionally and legally defined as the joint army of FRY and many of its ground forces, navy and air defence were stationed in Montenegro. However, in 1998 and 1999 the YA *de facto* became the army of Serbia, under the full control of Slobodan Milošević and his regime. Milošević completely eliminated the Montenegrin President Milo Djukanović from the Supreme Defence Council (SDC), regardless of the fact that he was a full member of this body. From 25 December 1998 on, in violation of the FRY Constitution and the laws, president of the SDC Slobodan Milošević no longer invited Djukanović to participate in the work and decision-making of the SDC, nor was Djukanović, in fact, a part of that body until Milošević fell from power (on 5 October 2000). Since then, he was – in reality, although illegally - eliminated from the work of the body which was the constitutional supreme commander of the YA. At that time, Djukanović had already parted ways with Milošević and his regime (their disagreements have particularly intensified in 1999 and 2000), and has not had any official communication or meetings with him since. The actual elimination of Djukanović from the work of the SDC was done contrary to Article 135 of the FRY Constitution. That is how Milošević completely subordinated the federal body, which - as a collective - commanded the YA. After October 1998, the SDC met once again on 25 December of that year. It did not convene during the FRY war with the NATO Alliance (March-June 1999).

² For additional information, see: Prof. Šerbo Rastoder and Novak Adžić, “Modern History of Montenegro 1988-2017 - From the Coup to the NATO Pact”, volume III, *Vijesti*, Podgorica, 2020, pp. 1315-1316.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1316

⁴ *Ibid.*

The Federal Government of the FRY was headed by Momir Bulatović, leader of the Montenegrin Socialist People's Party (SNP) which had not been recognised by official Montenegro since its formation in 1998. Momir Bulatović, the candidate who was defeated in the presidential elections in Montenegro (1997) was nevertheless, at the suggestion of Slobodan Milošević, still elected Prime Minister of the FRY on 18 May 1998. The FRY government was formed by the representatives of the SNP (which in Montenegro was considered an opposition party since it convincingly lost in the parliamentary elections held on 31 May 1998).

The day before the beginning of the NATO intervention, on 23 March 1999, the FRY government led by Momir Bulatović declared a state of imminent danger of war. Somewhat later it declared a state of war, and introduced the obligation of military mobilisation in Montenegro due to the FRY conflict with NATO. However, to avoid a conflict with the Alliance, the government in Montenegro opposed it and, instead of the war obligation, introduced a work obligation for its citizens. The already disturbed relations and tensions between the YA and the Montenegrin authorities reached a peak during the NATO intervention. Montenegro was under the threat of violence by Milošević's supporters, but there was also a danger that Milošević would use the YA, which was under his control, against the legal and legitimate Montenegrin authorities in an attempt to overthrow the government in Montenegro by way of a military coup.

During the war in Kosovo, the YA mobilised Montenegrin citizens and, voluntarily or by force, sent them to Kosovo battlefields. In March 1999, on the eve of the NATO bombing, the Parliament of the Republic of Montenegro adopted a resolution in which it demanded that the YA return and withdraw soldiers and reservists from Kosovo to Montenegro, and that the territory of Montenegro not be used in the upcoming FRY military conflict with NATO. These demands were however rejected by the YA and the top authorities in the FRY. In the allied action of 19 countries, carried out under the names "Merciful Angel" and "Allied Force", the territory of Montenegro was nevertheless hit by NATO bombs and cruise missiles. Around 8 pm of the first evening of the bombing, on 24 March 1999, the Alliance's air force hit and rendered inoperable the YA radar centre on Crni Rt near Bar. That same evening, NATO bombed the Golubovci military airport near Podgorica, and the YA naval radar-communication centre in the Bay of Kotor (Obosnik). NATO bombs also targeted the YA barracks in Danilovgrad, killing a soldier from Belgrade who was serving in the military. Two soldiers were wounded during the air attack on the marked targets and facilities in Montenegro, one of which was the military airport "Golubovci". During the NATO bombing of the FRY, which lasted from 24 March until 10 June 1999, and the fiercest war in Kosovo, Montenegro was – for the most part (although not entirely) – spared war destruction and casualties. Its government officials constantly repeated that Montenegro was not at war with NATO, acting very constructively and cooperatively in its relations with the international community.

The already divided Montenegrin society was additionally radicalised - politically, ideologically and in other ways. The division into supporters and opponents of the war in Kosovo and the conflict with NATO was especially intensified, and there was a great danger that a civil war might break out. A particularly important act, which may have decisively contributed to the prevention of the civil war in Montenegro during the war in Kosovo and the NATO military intervention, was the *Resolution on Civil Peace in Montenegro* of 26 March 1999, adopted by consensus by members of parliamentary political parties.

There was a dual power in Montenegro during the NATO strikes against the FRY: there were civilian authorities that functioned under the control of the Montenegrin Government, and the military authorities that operated under the control of the federal administration in Belgrade. In attempts to subjugate Montenegro to political-military structures in Belgrade during the FRY's war with NATO, the YA (both then and later) played the role of a political *gendarme* and was used as a means of putting pressure on Montenegrin political leadership. The break with

Milošević's policy spared Montenegro the destruction and consequences that certainly would have been greater if it had not distanced itself from the senseless war which was lost before it even began. But that does not mean that it was spared civilian casualties. Six civilians were killed when NATO bombed the bridge in the town of Murino on 30 April 1999, including children aged 9, 12 and 13.

On 18 April 1999, the YA General Staff demanded that the Montenegrin authorities place Montenegrin police under the command of the YA, in accordance with the decree declaring a state of war. The Montenegrin government rejected the request. The Government and its Ministry of Interior made it clear that they refused to place themselves under the control and administration of the YA. Two days later (on 20 April 1999), in Sutorina, near the Debeli Brijeg border crossing between Montenegro and Croatia, Yugoslav Army units entered the UN demilitarised zone and set up barricades, blocking the land exit from Montenegro and implementing rigorous control of the movement of passengers and transport of goods in both directions. The only land path that connected Montenegro to the West was taken over from the Montenegrin civilian authorities by the YA. In addition to voluntary, the Yugoslav Army also carried out forced mobilisation in Montenegro, where it had more than 25,000 troops and reservists at its disposal in April 1999. Montenegro was blocked by the YA from land, sea and air, unable to control its borders. It was almost blocked economically as well. A significant part of its territory was not under the actual control of the legal and legitimate Montenegrin civilian authorities; instead, it was under forced YA administration. There was a balance of power and a balance of fear, which essentially saved Montenegro from a possible bloody internal conflict.

During the war in Kosovo and the NATO intervention against the FRY, the Seventh Battalion of the YA posed a special threat to civil peace. It acted practically as the party army of the SNP and was the "main weapon" of the Milošević regime in Montenegro. This battalion was formed on 1 June 1999. It first numbered about 400 soldiers, later increasing to 900, and finally to about 1,900.

According to available data, 34 Montenegrin citizens were killed during the war in Kosovo (1998-1999) and the NATO military intervention in the FRY (1999). They were part of the YA and police forces of the Ministry of Interior of Serbia. One of them was a woman who was an employee of the Ministry of Defence of Serbia on Kosovo.

On the territory of the Republic of Montenegro, which was an integral part of the FRY during the war in Kosovo, war crimes against civilians occurred in the village of Kaludjerski Laz and the surrounding locations in the municipality of Rožaje - the area that was under the command of the Second Army of the YA. A large number of refugees from Albania lost their lives in the period 18 April - 21 May 1999. 17 Albanian refugee civilians were killed and five were wounded. The State Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Montenegro had filed indictments against 8 YNA officers and soldiers for this war crime, but all the defendants were acquitted in the final verdict of the Court of Appeals of the Republic of Montenegro of 8 December 2014, allegedly "due to lack of evidence". During the war in Kosovo and as a result of the humanitarian catastrophe, more than 110,000 refugees from Kosovo fled to Montenegro during the period 1998-1999. They were taken care of by the republic and local authorities, and especially by citizens, with the humanitarian help of international actors and organisations. Most of them were Albanians who later returned to Kosovo. About 22,000 Serb, Montenegrin, Roma and other people from Kosovo were also provided with refuge.

The war in Kosovo ended on 9 June 1999, when the representatives of the YA and the Serbian police and authorised NATO representatives signed the *Military-Technical Kumanovo Agreement*. Under the agreement, the YA and the Serbian police, as well as paramilitary forces, were to withdraw and allow international KFOR troops to come to Kosovo. KFOR was under the

obligation to disarm the KLA. Montenegro welcomed and accepted the signing of the Kumanovo Peace Agreement, although it did not participate in its conclusion since its government was against the war in Kosovo and the FRY's conflict with NATO. The bombing of FRY stopped on 10 June 1999, following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution no. 1244.

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