

*Light and shade of new European state*

### ***Montenegro Express***

*For someone it is just the latest Balkan craze. For others, a republic of smugglers, led by "boss" Milo Djukanovic. But the independence of Montenegro is not the result of a silly nationalism. On the contrary: this small mountain nation on the Adriatic can unfreeze, paradoxically, European integration of Balkans.*

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The bus climbing up the road from Pec (Kosovo) to Podgorica, Montenegro's capital, seems to come out of a Kusturica film. Rickety chairs, beer cans lying around, a stifling heat because the windows are sealed and the air conditioning does not work, there is only the open door on the roof to give a little relief. "It's the Balkan Express", joke two boys studying in Skopje, Macedonia, and return home to vote for the referendum.

There are two ways to arrive in Montenegro: as tourists, by sea, dazzled by the beauty of Montenegrin fjords; or from the inland, among people who earn 200 euros a month, and live isolated in the mountains. The sea and the mountains are the two souls of the country: noisemaker, cheater, bon vivant one, of the coast; and more backward but proud, stubborn and kind one of the mountains.

In the middle, Podgorica, small and dignified capital on the river Moraca, which still bears its Yugoslav imprint clear with a touch of modernity, we say with some ambition.

Invaded by the correspondents from all over the world (so to speak), Podgorica keeps all in all the aplomb of officialdom, the austerity personified by Slovak Lipcka, the man who presides over the referendum and endorses the historical shift to the independence: the strange quorum required by Javier Solana was achieved, albeit only slightly (55.4 percent), Montenegro is in effect a sovereign state and the celebration can begin.

Actually, cars with red flags with golden eagle had already begun their carousels without waiting for official figures, with some moments of tension against the group of "no" supporters, screaming "Srbija, Srbija", because they are the real nationalists.

But the true party of the independent Montenegro is in Cetinje, and here everyone knows it.

We must once again climb the mountain to find the historical heart of the nation, its moral capital. Cetinje is a charming little town that seems to live its splendid isolation, as it was a keeper of ancient wisdom far from the ghosts of the twentieth century.

Here is the residence of the royal dynasty of Montenegro, Petrovic, here is the pride of the ancient tradition of Montenegro independence, but without nostalgic or reactionary chills, such as those passed through Serbia, without aggressive temptations, even if Montenegrin kings were the leaders and spiritual guides of a warlike people (and we know how these myths afflicted the former Yugoslavia).

Montenegro, as and more than Serbia, was a borderland. Here the division between East and West passed, when Rome broke away from Byzantium, and when Christians were divided between Catholics and Orthodox. A fracture that seems destined to never set.

Montenegro, as and more than Serbia, then, remained the outpost of Christianity (someone would say of Europe) threatened or subjugated by the Ottoman Empire, by Istanbul sultans.

Perched on the mountains like a nest of eagles, the tiny kingdom of Montenegrin King-bishops went through the centuries with varying fortunes, small Slav wedge between the Habsburg expansion in the north and Turkish one south.

It is the history that made the Balkans a byword for instability, tension, permanent conflict.

It is the history that mixed ethnic groups, religions, cultures in these lands. A history that was always made by wars and diplomatic treats.

"Modern" Montenegro was born at the Berlin Conference of 1878 and ends tragically, with the Great War of 1914-18. This is the time experienced by the last king of Montenegro, Nikola, called "the

father in law of Europe".

King Nikola led his kingdom through all the "Belle Epoque" between the war drums of the endless Balkan wars and the violins of the Viennese waltzes in European courts. He has twelve children: three rather insignificant boys, and nine fascinating females.

Among bows and toasts, he weaves his family diplomacy, joining seven daughters in marriage to as many scions of the most important European royal dynasties, from Habsburgs to Romanoffs of Russia.

All this marriage diplomacy is useless when the great European powers come to the final battle, to the "useless slaughter" of 1914-18, denounced by Pope Benedict XV.

The two great empires, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman ones, imposed on Serbia and Montenegro, this time they are allies. The defeat will lead to the dissolution of both, ending a centuries-old history and leaving consequences that continue to this day.

Montenegrin army severely defeats against Austrians, covering Serb allies: Cetinje is occupied by the Habsburg, King Nikola took refuge abroad. He will never return to his country, and will end his days in anonymous poverty, abandoned by all the power that had supported him.

Ironically, to take off the crown of Montenegro and the title of king of all the South Slavs (Yugoslav), to which he aspired, is his nephew, Alexander Karageorgevic.

At the end of the war, Alexander gets in a semi-cheating way the annexation of Montenegro to Serbia and proclaims himself king of the new "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" a few years later called Yugoslavia.

King Alexander persuaded, with a large dose of deception, Montenegrin dignitaries gathered in the infamous Assembly of Podgorica vote for the exile of King Nikola and the union with Serbia.

His Yugoslavia was a reactionary regime, and the fidelity of Montenegrins was obtained with the violence of "Chetniks", Serbian militias lay supporters of the king. But according to the official history, Serbian and Montenegrin peoples have always been brothers, both in the "first Yugoslavia", as they say here, and in the second, the one founded by Tito.

In this version you opt only for the good part, that feeling of "unity and brotherhood" that was the slogan of the Socialist Federal Yugoslavia, and that certainly existed (indeed, for many people still exist, and not only among Serbs and Montenegrins). But the dark pages of Yugoslav civil war that broke out after the liberation from Germans at the end of 1943, was removed. Fortunately, Montenegro did not establish a collaborationist regime as it happened for Croatia of Ante Pavelic, a bloodthirsty beast, with his notorious "Ustasha" who attempted genocide of Serbs, Jews, Roma and other minorities.

Montenegro was occupied by Italians, who tried to resurrect a puppet kingdom, but the experiment lasted only a few days. One of the sons of King Nikola, just for his refusal to become a puppet in the hands of the Nazi-Fascists, went to a concentration camp in Germany. Thus, Montenegro canceled in 1918 reappears as one of the six republics making up Yugoslav federation in the constitution of 1946. And you are not wrong in saying that among the six federal states, Montenegro is the most linked to Serbia.

It is an almost natural bond: Montenegrin mountaineers go to study in Belgrade (and often stop there), Belgrade people go to the beach in Montenegro, who can buy holidays home. The wave of nationalism that grows in the eighties in almost all the republics of Yugoslavia, from Serbia, also involves Montenegro.

Today they try to minimize the collective madness of that dark period, before and during the war, but there are facts that can not be ignored. For example, the fact that the number of volunteers at the front of Montenegro was higher (in relation to population) than any other republic in Yugoslavia.

Or Milo Djukanovic, who now poses as the father of the country, in the eighties was a young brilliant and ambitious leader of the Communist Party, and a supporter of Milosevic. "To understand this period we must always keep in mind that the regime exercised absolute control over the media", says Denice Nikolic, a journalist of "Pink TV". The reality was continually distorted, mystified, and in a backward country such as Montenegro this negative influence was undoubtedly stronger.

On the other hand, even the rest of Europe did not understand what was happening in Yugoslavia, so that, faced with the devilish complexity of the situation, many people dismissed the whole affair as a result of atavistic Balkan instincts of hatred and violence, and it is still possible to hear this absurd "anthropological" explanation even here.

In 1990 the introduction of multiparty politics apparently puts an end to the political monopoly of the Communist Party, and leads off the various separatist movements. Montenegro in that phase opts for a pro-Serb (ie, pro-Milosevic) line, but various ethnic groups that have always been present in its territory will not get really in conflict.

This does not mean that "Djukanovic has managed to keep Montenegro away from war", as sometimes you can hear. To bomb near Dubrovnik, for example, are essentially Montenegrins (who in subsequent clashes have around 200 dead people).

Djukanovic, who, 28, is already head of government, riding the nationalist wave as long as it is worthwhile. It is worthwhile for him especially in terms of business, as all other Yugoslav leaders involved in the war, because Montenegro quickly becomes a formidable center for the black market, a huge business hub for the entire period of the conflict and international sanctions. In those damned years, there are only intellectuals grouped in the Liberal Party of Zlavko Perovic to oppose strenuously against war and unholy alliance with Milosevic regime.

The idea of Montenegro independence was founded by them, the ones who invite young people to openly abandon the call up, and who must suffer all kinds of insults (those who are against the war is automatically an "*Ustasha*"), of threats and oppression. They are, unfortunately, an although significant minority. Their stronghold is ancient Cetinje, where they have a unanimous consent. They are supported also by ethnic minorities, starting with Albanians, frightened by the frenzy of the nationalist of "Great Serbia".

Liberals are opposition. The Communists rule, remained quietly in power after they changed names and made a façade of reform, pompously called "anti-bureaucratic revolution": enough to replace the old leadership, with new recruits, led by the ineffable Djukanovic. They are able, by manipulating the consent of Montenegrins, to make "yes" to the union with Serbia win in a referendum of 1992 (which many people here consider a half-farce).

Montenegro goes on ignoring many of the atrocities of war, which ends, for exhaustion, in December 1995.

"People have learned almost nothing from the war", say disconsolate young people of an association for dialogue between cultures. And they add: "Even today, many people have not understood what happened, and very few people know that even in Montenegro, there were cases of ethnic cleansing, near the border with Bosnia". Maybe that is why you can see on view, in some newspaper stands, the biography of Ratko Mladic, the Executioner of Srebrenica, war criminal wanted by Hague Tribunal.

The fact is that what was not clear to people, it was clear to Djukanovic, who certainly can not claim a moral high profile, but he definitely has great political talent.

Djukanovic understands in advance that he must burn Milosevic's bridges, now that the war is over. As a real bully, he is able to purge the police and army, surrounding himself with loyalists and neutralizing the military presence of Serbia, although he is officially an ally of Belgrade.

Thanks to his diplomatic skills and his open-mindedness, Montenegro gradually wins a true independence, and avoids the terrible blood toll that neighboring Kosovo is going to pay.

Even considering the objective basic difference of the two situations, one can say that the "freebooter" Djukanovic succeeds where the good Rugova, with his policy of non-violence, fails miserably.

Unfortunately, in those years the policy in Balkans is just a game of force, behind the diplomatic hypocrisy of all those involved.

The turning point occurs in two stages, 1997 and 1999.

Djukanovic wins the elections in 1997, snatching the idea of independence of the poor Zlavko Perovic, who, in order to defeat him (since he considers him a mafia boss) accepted an alliance with pro-Serb parties, making up a mere nine percent. Montenegrins have somehow decided that

Djukanovic is the right man to get them out of trouble. They are not wrong. When the NATO bombing of 1999 arrives, officially caused by the crisis in Kosovo, Montenegro is largely spared, and people start to think that it is time that Milosevic and Serbia go to hell. At year end, Montenegro adopted German mark as its currency, to change into euro three years later. The adoption of a currency different from Serbian dinar makes even more surreal the shift from the state that stubbornly continues to be called "Yugoslavia" to the new "Union of Serbia and Montenegro". A real institutional absurdity put up with the diligent assistance of Javier Solana, who would better change jobs.

Serbia and Montenegro were like two separated under the same roof; Montenegro lived a true independence, but meaningless bureaucratic structures were kept, until the comic situation that even now there are duplicates of everything in Montenegro, even firemen (a national body and a "federal" one, which clearly will disappear).

No, the union between Serbia and Montenegro had no longer any sense. On the one hand, a "giant" of ten million inhabitants, with a ruling class that is unable to close the embarrassing nationalist past; on the other hand, a mixed small country of 700 thousand inhabitants, which left the burden of the war years behind to come as soon as possible in Europe. Of course, the fact that to lead the independent Montenegro there is a man under investigation by the Prosecutor of Bari for international traffic and criminal association, seems to endorse the image of Montenegro "republic of traffickers," or even "Colombia on the Adriatic".

But this picture is deeply unfair towards people of Montenegro and the choice they made.

The independence of Montenegro is probably more "European" than any other republic of the former Yugoslavia, because it is a political and not ethnic one: original Montenegrins are only 40 percent of the population.

It is no coincidence that Albanians, Bosniaks, Roma and other minorities voted compact for independence. Montenegro is not and will never be the nation of Slavs or those of Orthodox religion: the right-wing extremists were all in the coalition of "no". And the fact that there was no accident, and that the fairness and transparency of the vote was exemplary, is much more important than problems of organized crime in the country, which moreover are certainly not unique in Montenegro.

Almost everyone knows that the idea of independence is truly born from the liberal, pacifist and pro-European wing, by choice and not for convenience. Too many people are tired of Djukanovic, perceived primarily as a lesser evil, a necessary choice in a difficult period. For that reason someone actually expects that the charismatic Milo, who always travels surrounded by an impressive mob of "bodyguards", now that he entered history (and made a lot of money), could also retire from political life. Maybe it is an optimistic prediction. But everyone agrees in saying that they can finally talk about the real problems of the country, now that there is no longer the excuse of Serbia, now that the big step was taken.

The debate, in view of October elections, will no longer be absorbed by the dispute over sovereignty, but will need to be addressed to corruption, poverty, development, fight against organized crime. Nobody wants to boundaries and barriers with Serbia, because everybody has friends and relatives in Belgrade, and because everybody, first Serbs, are tired of the isolation in which they lived for years, tired of visas, customs inspections, limits to freedom of movement, in fact almost non-existent with both Croatia and Bosnia.

Choosing independence, Montenegrins have also indirectly helped Serbian leaders, so stupidly embarrassed and reluctant to accept the new state. They will realize once more how much time and energy have already lost chasing a grandeur that has no longer any meaning.

Sometimes you can separate to join better, as amply demonstrated by Slovakia and Czech Republic. Sometimes to go on you must go backwards. In the old and quiet Cetinje, a small mountain refuge of hope, they seem to have always known it.

**Cesare Sangalli**