

## Global Journalist: Montenegrin Independence Referendum

**Abstract:** On this June 1, 2006 program, host guest host Byron Scott leads a discussion of the recent Montenegrin independence referendum. Four journalists speculate on what the ramifications of the May 21, 2006 vote might be for the Balkans.

**Host:** Byron Scott

### Guests:

- [Dragana Nikolic Solomon](#)
- [Radomir Petric](#)
- [Dr. James Lyon](#)
- Guzman Sala

**Mentioned:** Balkan, Montenegro, Serbia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Belgrade, Montenegro Media Institute, International Crisis Group, Pristina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bar, Republic of Srpska

**Runtime:** 28:35

Byron Scott 0:01

Good evening, and welcome to Global Journalist. This is Byron Scott, sitting in for Stuart Loory. Tonight we're going to talk about the decision made in a Balkan referendum less than two weeks ago, by the citizens of the of the newest world nation or about to be the newest world nation. Montenegro, which voted by a referendum of 55.5%. To separate from its union with Serbia. The question is what will what will the ramifications of this decision be for the Balkans? Will it be another Velvet Revolution as we saw between the Czech Republic and and Slovakia in in a previous decade, or will it set off a chain reaction of nationalism and and perhaps even violence or other distress in in the Balkans. We have with us a collection of analysts and journalists to speak to that topic from that region. And I'd like to introduce them to you. First, Ms. Dragana Nikolic Solomon, Serbia director for the Balkan investigative reporting network. She is coming to us from Budva Montenegro although she's based in Belgrade. Miss Solomon, welcome to the show.

Dragana Nikolic Solomon 1:35

Thank you.

Byron Scott 1:36

Next, Radomir Petric correspondent for the Montenegro Media Institute speaking to us from Bar on this also in the seaside in Montenegro. Radomir, again welcome back to the show.

Radomir Petric 1:51

Good evening, everyone.

Byron Scott 1:52

Thank you, Dr. James Lyon, senior Balkan advisor for the International Crisis Group which is based in Brussels, but he is their analyst based in Belgrade, Dr. Lyon we're glad to have you with us.

Dr. James Lyon 2:06

Thank you.

Byron Scott 2:08

And finally, but certainly not last Mr. Guzman Sula, a journalistic co-editor of the daily newspaper in Pristina, Kosovo. Let me begin, if I might, with Radomir because Radomir, you are a local journalist and an old friend of mine, I would, by the way, tell the listeners, who covered the run up to the election less than two weeks ago and who also is probably very well placed to talk about the mood of the citizens and what may happen short term at least economically in the region. Could you just give us a few comments?

Radomir Petric 2:59

First of all, I would like to let you all know that I'm speaking from nearby the biggest Montenegrin Park. This city population 40,000. During the last 16 years experimentally supported the idea of Montenegro independence by the majority of its soldiers (unintelligible) not only in Montenegro, but its multi confessional and multinational population components. So far, despite variety of religions and nations, local residents lived peacefully without any religious conflict for centuries. I have covered the local referendum campaign in Bar from start till the end, then I can find that residents of Bar once again proved their loyalty to each other and to live in harmony. During campaign the participants of both referendum blocks did not raise tangents among the voters and supporters of Bar. Talking about Referendum Day, it has some kind of spirit of celebration. You know, by noon almost two thirds of voters turned out. At the end of voting, 9pm, that percent was over 80, the highest in local voting history. Over the Bar voting process event without any incident supporters of independency by the Orthodox, the Catholics and Muslims together vote by majority of the 7000 votes, approximately is 60,000 to 9000. They came out in the streets in large number after the first announcement of referendum results, waving the Montenegrin flags, singing the Montenegrin songs and driving in their cars all over the town and celebrated victory from 10 p.m. till dawn. Their celebration went without any kind of conflict. The opponents stayed at home. The day after referendum, which previously was treated as a potential threat, also passed by without any conflict.

Byron Scott 5:05

Sounds like quite a party. I wish I could have been there. Miss Solomon, could you- I use to call her Southern excuse me- could you give us your perspective?

Dragana Nolic Solomon 5:17

I think this is one may be less than one very unusual thing that happened in the Balkans. I mean, we saw it firsthand with a split between Macedonia actually a peaceful secession from what it used to be Serbia and Montenegro referendum which was really done according to the

highest standards. And here I'm talking to lots of journalists on the ground and people here are very, very happy. First of all, you know, that's something that I've always wanted to have happen and they feel a little bit proud as well by the way it was (unintelligible). And that, you know, here we have something that happened without bloodshed. It's quite a lesson for everyone and I think, you know we have now someone speaking from Kaha Ditore, I think it's a very positive example for Kosovo maybe, and in a way how you can do things as well. We all have to believe that sometimes it's possible in the nice peaceful democratic ways to get something done in the Balkans. And this is one of the cases and I think that current Montenegrin leadership is receiving praise from everywhere, you know, but having said that, I think that, you know, now we are in independent Montenegro and we have to actually start working. I'm a Montenegrin. It means a lot to me what will happen to the state, and a little bit worries here is the fact that the two blocks those who wanted to stay in the union with Serbia and those who wanted to secede, I've continued to be a little bit apart. We know that the union is start, kind of, you know, criticizing in vain. And they don't have the case the referendum and, you know, trying to preserve the voters for the next elections. But I would like the new government to start speaking as well and communicating to the unionists in the country.

Byron Scott 7:18

Excellent. Let's move on to that question. Now, Guzman Sula, you are in Kosovo as a journalist. Part of what to us here in the United States is well known as an area of conflict and also still part of Serbia. Could you tell us what the ramifications of the Montenegrin referendum are being looked at as they're in Pristina?

Guzman Sula 7:47

Well first of all, I wanted to thank you for the invitation, for giving me this opportunity to speak for your listeners. I will say in the state that the referendum in Montenegro was something that was a key issue in Kosovo. As a journalist, I was covering referendum in Montenegro. And when I came back here in Kosovo, I took newspapers, and I saw that all of them had in their front pages, results from the referendum. And I saw also that the key Kosovar leaders made comments and hailed the referendum and congratulating Mr. Euconis (ph?), first of all, and in this respect, I will quote Prime Minister Mr. Agim Çeku as saying that Kosovo will join Montenegro in becoming a sovereign state soon — by the end of this year.

Byron Scott 8:54

Do you believe this increases the pressure to resolve the Kosovo matter? Is that the case?

Guzman Sula 9:02

Well, in fact, there's no linkage between Montenegro and Kosovo, as some politicians here might say, at least in terms of legal impact, that, of course, in terms of psychological effect, there is a linkage. Most of Kosovars believe that now a new phase of dissolving of Yugoslavia is it's on, it's on the sign to go and some people who see and political leaders see that if Montenegro was the last part of Yugoslavia, then close on the last spot.

Byron Scott 9:50

Dr. Lyon, from the International Crisis Group, do you agree with this assessment and what about could you also mention what you see is the attitude in other parts of the former Yugoslavia, such as the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia.

Dr. James Lyon 10:08

Well I think first of all, we ought to ask ourselves, how did Belgrade react? And I think this has been quite interesting. Once again, we see as Dragana mentioned, you know, there is a split inside of Montenegro that is going to have to be healed over time. But I think it's also important to look at Belgrade and to see how official Serbia reacted because we had two completely different reactions. On the one hand, we had the president of Serbia, Mr. Boris Tadic and the foreign minister of Serbia and Montenegro, the state Union Minister have a brush with both of who came out ahead of the referendum, and said clearly that they would prefer that the state union continue to exist and that Montenegro stay with Serbia but however, if Montenegro should choose to leave, that they would wish to be the first to congratulate Montenegro and that they would like to do all the for Serbia to do all in, its power to Continue good relations with Montenegro. On the other hand, you have the more nationalist elements sitting in Belgrade led by Mr. Koštunica the Prime Minister, who did not think that the referendum would succeed and who seemed to have been in complete shock, and did not have any contingency plans for what this would mean for Serbia, in other words, that Serbia was independent now in Serbia had to now reconstitute its government as an independent country. So there's there's a bit of shell shock on the part of the of the Nationalist Forces here in Belgrade, who didn't think it would ever actually come to this and who thought that the referendum would not succeed. On the other hand, if you look outside Belgrade if you look through Republic of Srpska, Bosnia, there has been a bit of loose talk by the Prime Minister of Republica of Srpska Mr. Milorad Dodik, mentioning a referendum and Republic of Srpska and at this stage, it's perhaps too early To say for certain how serious this was, because because Bosnia and Herzegovina is right now in the middle of a very heated internal political debate about constitutional reforms, because the Dayton Constitution, the Dayton peace accord constitution simply isn't capable of getting of moving the country forward, and of enabling it to move forward in EU integration processes. And so there has to be constitutional reforms. And of course, the Bosniaks want one thing the Serbs one another the Croats one another, and they're having to compromise. And there's good reason to believe that Mr. Dodik's comments about a referendum may have been in the context of this internal political debate. Nonetheless, they may take on a life of their own seeing as how this is an election year in Boston. Yep. And there's concern that some people might actually think that a Montenegrin referendum would give Republic of Srpska license to hold its own independence referendum in which case we would have that would have catastrophic results for Serbia because it would probably end up with Serbia being even further dismembered. Because the argument would be that if Republic of Srpska can hold a referendum then so too can the Albanian and Bosniak and Hungarian portions of Serbia. So it's kind of a slippery slope, that we're all hoping we're hoping cooler heads will prevail, and that no one will head down that slope.

Byron Scott 13:29

Let me remind our listeners that that the Montenegrin referendum separating Montenegro from Serbia was marked the departure of the last of the six Republics from the old Yugoslavia, but as our commentators have been alluding to, there are a number of regions where still the fire of independence flares and burns bright. We're going to take a quick break. Now I wanted to remind you this is Global Journalist on KBIA. We're back and wanted to remind you that if you would like to listen again to tonight's show that you can listen to it on our websites KBIA.org or globaljournalist.org. We're talking again with four analysts and journalists from the Balkan region about the recent referendum in Montenegro declaring independence. I wanted to bring in at this part of the show something about the role of the European Union and what that might bode for the future. We know that the terms for both the Belgrade agreement which from March 2002 that set up the the Montenegrin Serbian Alliance. And the terms for the referendum were — I don't want to use the word dictated but certainly outlined by Mr. Javier Solana and the foreign minister of the of the European Union as a matter of fact, many Montenegrins, who I've spoken to in the past referred ironically to “Solania(ph?)” as as the Serbian Montenegrin Alliance. Dragana, could you talk to us about what you might see as the as the future role of the European Union in this as as Montenegro and Serbia both perhaps move on separate paces towards EU membership?

Dragana Nikolic Solomon 15:52

Oh, well, yes, I think the European Union played a very crucial role here but you know, by setting out the the conditions for referendum which were respected by everyone, but by making sure that both sides the first wanted to remain the union and those who were opposing it actually agreed to the terms and conditions. I think that the the kind of threshold that was set for the independent block was very, very high, very, very difficult one which they actually mastered. And I think that from now on, everyone needs its own way. But the thing my worry does not stop here, because I think that, you know, despite of this process happening very peacefully, I'm worried about the fact that Serbia is not coming to terms so quickly with Montenegro's independence in some sense. Belgrade always has very late reactions. You know, it's suddenly they're shocked that as James said that independence happen of Montenegro. What I'm worried about is that Serbia is going to face a very hard year that Serbia is going to Most probably lose Kosovo by the end of the year. And I don't think that the Serbian politicians have actually prepared the Serbian public for this. And I think that the big big drama will happen at the moment where somebody realizes that actually another part of what they concern, territory will be lost. And I think the government is making a big mistake. And then also not recognizing the referendum and, you know, offering a hand to the Montenegrin leadership and, you know, continuing to be a partner in all this. And then the second way a vote yesterday in Belgrade, they declared some of the Serbian negotiating team came out to the platform for the cost of the negotiations, and they surprised us again, we have this unique formula more than autonomy and less than independence, which really, everybody knows it's outdated and it's not working. So, you know, I would plead the Serbian government to start start opening their eyes to reality. In the Serbian public because it's going to be dramatic.

Byron Scott 18:04

Guzman, what is the view of this in, in Kosovo?

Guzman Sula 18:11

Well, I think that (unintelligible) in Kosovo did not change after what's happened in Montenegro. I think the EU is planning to take over a monitor mission in Kosovo after Kosovo defines its final status, and we know that EU will monitor all issues regarding justice and police.

Byron Scott 18:41

James Lyon, does the International Crisis Group view the European Union's as a stabilizing influence in this situation or do you believe that they are a disturbing player?

Dr. James Lyon 18:57

Well the European Union took a very, very risky gamble on this with Montenegro, we know that the European Union wanted Serbia and Montenegro to stay together and precisely for that reason, they created a unusually high standard that Montenegro would have to fulfill in order to gain independence. On the other hand, by putting this standard in place, they were able to get Belgrade and the Montenegrin opposition to sign on in advance and say that they would accept the result of the referendum, no matter what the outcome would be. Now, this was very important because it means now, the opposition and Belgrade have committed in advance that they will respect the outcome of the referendum had this not occurred, there is a chance both the opposition and Belgrade could have found reasons to try and stir up trouble inside of Montenegro. But the gamble paid off because at the end of the day, it means that the outcome has to be accepted by everyone. So in this regard, I guess you could say it's good. On the other hand, it's interesting to see the EU put together a referendum criteria that doesn't exist anywhere in a single EU country. So we can say the outcome has been good, but the road it took to that outcome was very, very risky, and had very many potential pitfalls, all of which have fortunately been avoided.

Byron Scott 20:23

Just to remind our listeners, there was a setting up a margin of 55% for dissolution, and the actual vote was something around 55.5% as I, as I recall. Radomir, speaking, as perhaps the representative of on the ground Montenegrin journalists, could you say whether or not Montenegrins want to be part of the European Union?

Radomir Petric 20:59

Of course, that the mainly atmosphere and the first of the members of generation the tie belongs to want one day, our country to be part of the European Union. First of all, that means that government should follow and implement all European standards and laws on the ground. It also means that we can in a next couple of years, I hope so. So we can travel all over Europe without the so needed visa. You know, it's almost Mission Impossible to average citizen on Montenegro to get a visa for a Schengen visa for European Union countries.

Byron Scott 21:56

Dragana, would these be the principal goals of EU membership? Do you believe?

Dragana Nikolic Solomon 22:05

Well, you know, getting into Europe is a place is a thorny, thorny way I mean before Montenegro and or any other members of the uh you know, Serbs or Bosnians could travel freely and I'm really thinking that this is something really outrageous for for actually the citizens of these countries, the especially for young people and students who can never leave and see how the life looks like from the other side. I think that the road is very, very long. And you know that Europe going to Europe does not only mean the freedom to travel, but actually the process itself is not something that a country which is actually on the road to accession can, how you say, create or have, you know that certain rules and regulations and certain obligations that the country must fulfill and process is quite impersonal? It's like ticking the boxes. And saying okay, you did this. And now this is your next turn. And I wish and I hope that Montenegro would have lots of young educated people that Montenegro will have enough administrative capacity to implement the the EU.

Byron Scott 23:17

I think one of the one of the oddities of "Solonia," if you will, was in Montenegro, the euro was the currency and remains the currency. Yes. Let me let me go back then. Just briefly to to what so many of us in the West seem to worry about not the not that happy present, but the but the troubled future. Guzman, the spotlight is shifting to Kosovo. Do you believe that independence for Kosovo, of Montenegrin sort, is it all possible or do you believe that there will be a longer process?

Guzman Sula 24:11

Of course, I think around them, it's Montenegro has shown that peaceful solutions can be found here and can remain even in this region. And we saw in that most equal became abandoned, and there was no violence, even though only 5% of population there was in favor of this solution. While we know for for for so long, that more than 90% of population here wants to go away from Serbia. And I think that if it's possible is granted independence, then there will be no chance for violence and I think that this is the best solution and I think that independence for Kosovo will stabilize the region more than any other possible solution.

Byron Scott 25:08

Dr. Lyon, do you believe that Belgrade is prepared for the ramifications of all this?

Dr. James Lyon 25:15

No, I think it's very clear that the current government here is very much in denial and worst of all, very much out of touch with the current international diplomatic and political reality. Unfortunately, Serbia's policy makers seem to be guided by sort of a day late and \$1 short. a mindset that is a whenever they propose an idea or a solution. For, for example, Kosovo or for Montenegro. It's usually an idea that would have worked well say 10 years ago, or 15 or 20 years ago, but the idea has now been passed up by events and is no longer workable. For example, the new Serbian government program for Kosovo that Dragana mentioned is precisely an example of this have this program been offered 10 years ago, to the Kosovo Albanians or 15 years ago, I'm certain it would have been quite workable, and all sides could have come to a

very amicable agreement. But now events have overtaken it. And it's just not workable. The problem here is the denial, the inability to understand the changed world and the people in the leading circles around Prime Minister students that seem to be have a very myopic mindset, and don't quite understand the tectonic shifts that have occurred in international diplomacy since the fall of the Berlin Wall. And many of them still view the world through the old lenses of the communist ideology. They themselves are not communist, but to that way of thinking that was so prevalent back then, and many of them are also heavily influenced even to this day. By the nationalist ideologies that were given prominence under the Milosevic regime in which are still given prominence within Mr. Kustinitzu's (ph?) party..

Byron Scott 27:13

We're running out of time here and I, I have to say that I wish now that I were with you, they're in Montenegro, celebrating your new independence. Congratulations. That to that, and I think we are in the United States will continue to look at what happens in the Balkans and, and, and particularly in Kosovo. I want to thank our guests. Miss Dragana Nikolic Solomon for the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, speaking to us from Budva, in Montenegro; Radomir Petrus correspondent for The Montenegro Media Institute, speaking to us from Bar in Montenegro; Dr. James Lyon, senior Balkan advisor for the International Crisis Group in Belgrade and Mr. Guzman Sula, journalists at Koha Ditore, a daily newspaper in Pristina, Kosovo. Our sound engineer is Pat Akers. Our sound engineer is Pat Akers. Our producers are John Amick, Jeronimo Nisa Luna, Maria Inés Miro-Quesada Pacheco and Hyunjin Seo and this is Byron Scott for Stuart Loory. Good night.

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