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The Politics of Montenegro

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Introduction

Montenegro, perched on the rugged Adriatic coast and carved by a rich, turbulent history, has emerged as a remarkable study in political transformation and resilience. Once a principality and later a kingdom, its strategic location on the Balkan Peninsula has historically drawn overlapping spheres of influence—from Ottoman sultans to Venetian doges, from socialist federations to European democracies. These legacies have indelibly marked the country's political landscape, sowing both challenges and opportunities as Montenegro navigates the path between old identities and new ambitions.

The birth of modern Montenegro as an independent state in 2006 ushered in a significant period of political recalibration. The transition from federal republic to sovereign nationhood required not just a redefinition of borders and foreign policy objectives, but also a fundamental reassessment of internal governance, democratic practice, and national values. The adoption of the 2007 Constitution provided the legal cornerstone for this young democracy, outlining clear divisions of power among an elected president, a unicameral parliament, and an independent judiciary. It also enshrined vital principles—civic equality, environmental stewardship, and the rule of law—that continue to guide Montenegro's development.

Navigating the day-to-day realities of governance, however, has proved a complex endeavor. For much of the post-independence era, Montenegrin politics was marked by the dominance of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), a legacy formation with roots in the Yugoslav past. In recent years, vibrant new parties and coalitions have surged onto the scene, giving rise to a competitive but frequently fragmented political arena. Issues such as corruption, transparency, and the impartiality of institutions remain at the forefront of both public debate and international scrutiny, as do the deep internal divisions—political, ethnic, and religious—that shape modern Montenegrin society.

A unique aspect of Montenegro's political system is its capacity for adaptation—evident in how coalition governments have become a regular feature of parliamentary life. With dozens of parties vying for representation, consensus-building and compromise are often necessary, albeit sometimes elusive. Meanwhile, local governance, the role of minorities, and the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church contribute to the complexity and, at times, volatility of the national political picture.

Externally, Montenegro continues to pursue a pro-European and Atlantic trajectory, seeking fuller integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and striving to strengthen its diplomatic ties with both regional neighbors and Western allies. Yet these efforts

unfold against a backdrop of geopolitical flux, fluctuating public opinion, and persistent economic challenges—factors that all influence the calculus of policy-making and leadership in the country.

This book offers a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Montenegro, delving into its history, institutions, key actors, and contemporary debates. By examining both the foundational structures of state and the pressing issues of the present day, it seeks to illuminate the multifaceted journey of a nation whose politics are as dynamic and layered as its storied past.

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CHAPTER ONE: Historical Foundations of Montenegrin Politics

To truly grasp the intricacies of modern Montenegrin politics, one must first delve into the deep currents of its history. This is not merely an academic exercise; the echoes of centuries past resonate profoundly in the political landscape of today, shaping identities, influencing allegiances, and providing context for contemporary challenges. Montenegro's rugged mountains have not only offered natural defenses but have also served as silent witnesses to a complex narrative of resistance, survival, and the persistent struggle for self-determination.

The land that is now Montenegro has a long and layered history, with evidence of human habitation stretching back to the Paleolithic era. Illyrian tribes were among the early inhabitants, followed by the arrival of the Romans, who incorporated the region into their province of Dalmatia. Roman rule left its mark in infrastructure and language, but the mountainous terrain and fierce local populations often limited their complete control. As the Roman Empire waned, various groups migrated through or settled in the Balkans, including the Slavs, who would come to form the demographic bedrock of Montenegro.

The South Slavs arrived in the Balkans in several waves during the 6th and 7th centuries. The tribes that settled in the area of present-day Montenegro gradually organized themselves into župas, or territorial and administrative units, led by župans. These early political entities often existed in a complex relationship with larger regional powers, including the Byzantine Empire, which sought to maintain influence and control over the strategic Adriatic coastline. The Byzantines, with their sophisticated administration and Orthodox Christian faith, exerted a significant cultural and political pull on the early Slavic polities in the region.

One of the earliest and most significant South Slavic states to emerge in the area was Duklja, later known as Zeta. Centered around the Lake Skadar region, Duklja gained prominence in the 10th and 11th centuries. Under rulers like Prince Jovan Vladimir and later King Bodin, Duklja achieved a degree of independence and even briefly expanded its territory. This period marked an important early assertion of a distinct political identity, although it remained subject to shifting alliances and the power dynamics of the wider Balkan region. The legacy of Duklja/Zeta is often invoked in modern Montenegrin discourse as a historical antecedent to contemporary statehood, providing a sense of historical continuity.

However, maintaining independence in the face of powerful neighbors was a constant

challenge. Duklja/Zeta eventually fell under the sway of the Serbian Nemanjić dynasty in the late 12th century. The Nemanjićs incorporated Zeta into their expanding Serbian Kingdom and later Empire. During this period, Serbian culture, language, and the Serbian Orthodox Church became deeply embedded in the region. Monasteries like Morača and Piva, founded during the Nemanjić era, remain important spiritual and cultural centers in Montenegro today and are potent symbols of this historical connection.

The decline of the Serbian Empire in the 14th century, particularly after the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, created a power vacuum in the Balkans. Local lords and noble families rose to prominence, asserting control over various territories. In Zeta, the Balšić family emerged as powerful rulers, initially acknowledging some form of Venetian or Hungarian suzerainty but gradually consolidating their own authority. The Balšići engaged in complex diplomatic and military maneuvers, navigating the competing interests of Venice, the Ottoman Empire, and other regional players.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire in the 14th and 15th centuries dramatically reshaped the political map of the Balkans. The Ottomans steadily advanced, conquering Serbia, Bosnia, and other neighboring lands. Montenegro, or Crna Gora as it came to be known, faced the relentless pressure of the expanding Ottoman state. The mountainous terrain provided some protection, but the lowlands and coastal areas were vulnerable to Ottoman incursions.

The Crnojević dynasty succeeded the Balšići in the mid-15th century. Facing the increasing Ottoman threat, Ivan Crnojević moved the capital to Cetinje, a more defensible location nestled in the mountains, which would later become the Old Royal Capital of Montenegro. The Crnojevići made efforts to resist Ottoman advances, but they were ultimately unable to prevent the Ottomans from gaining control over significant parts of their territory. By the end of the 15th century, much of what is now Montenegro was either directly under Ottoman rule or paid tribute to the Sublime Porte.

However, pockets of resistance remained in the inaccessible mountain areas. These areas, particularly the core territories around Cetinje, managed to maintain a precarious degree of autonomy. This period marks the beginning of a long and defining era in Montenegrin history: the struggle against Ottoman domination and the development of a unique socio-political structure centered around warrior clans and the Prince-Bishops.

The Prince-Bishops, or Vladikas, of Cetinje became the spiritual and temporal leaders of the Montenegrin people in the areas that resisted full Ottoman control. This unique institution, which combined religious authority with political and military leadership, emerged in the late 17th century. The position of Vladika was initially hereditary, passing from uncle to nephew, establishing powerful dynastic lines. This system

concentrated power and provided a focal point for Montenegrin resistance.

The Vladikas faced the constant challenge of defending their territory from Ottoman attacks while also navigating complex relationships with other powers, including Venice, which controlled parts of the Adriatic coast, and later the Russian Empire, which emerged as a protector of Orthodox Christians in the Balkans. The Vladikas skillfully played these powers against each other, securing aid and maintaining a fragile independence.

Notable Prince-Bishops like Danilo I Petrović-Njegoš, who founded the Petrović-Njegoš dynasty that would rule Montenegro for over two centuries, consolidated the Vladika's authority and initiated reforms aimed at strengthening the internal structure of Montenegrin society. His successor, Petar I Petrović-Njegoš, known as Saint Petar of Cetinje, further united the Montenegrin tribes and achieved significant military victories against the Ottomans. He is revered as a national hero for his role in preserving Montenegrin autonomy.

The 19th century was a period of significant transformation for Montenegro. Under the dynamic leadership of Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, the most famous of the Prince-Bishops and a renowned poet and philosopher, Montenegro continued its struggle against the Ottomans while also developing a more centralized state administration. Njegoš's literary works, particularly "The Mountain Wreath," are considered cornerstones of Montenegrin and Serbian literature and reflect the epic struggle for freedom and identity.

Following Njegoš's death, his successor Danilo II Petrović-Njegoš, secularized the state in 1852, becoming the first Prince of Montenegro. This marked a crucial step in the evolution of Montenegro from a theocratic principality to a modern secular state. Danilo II continued the fight against the Ottomans and worked to modernize the country's legal and administrative systems.

Montenegro's independence was formally recognized at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, following its participation in the Balkan wars against the Ottoman Empire. This was a moment of immense national pride and a culmination of centuries of struggle. Montenegro's territory was also significantly expanded, giving it a much-desired outlet to the Adriatic Sea.

In 1910, Prince Nicholas I, who had ruled since 1860, proclaimed Montenegro a kingdom, elevating his status and that of his nation on the international stage. Nicholas I, a wily and long-reigning monarch, navigated the complex Balkan politics of the early 20th century, often positioning Montenegro as a champion of Serbian unity. His reign saw further modernization efforts, including the adoption of a constitution in 1905, which introduced a parliamentary system, albeit one with significant power retained by the monarch.

Montenegro participated in the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, further expanding its territory at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. However, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 brought new challenges. Montenegro allied with Serbia and the Allied powers, and despite fierce resistance, the country was occupied by Austro-Hungarian forces in 1916. King Nicholas and the government went into exile.

The end of World War I brought about a dramatic and controversial change in Montenegro's political status. In 1918, a controversial assembly in Podgorica, known as the Podgorica Assembly, voted to unite Montenegro with the Kingdom of Serbia. This decision was highly contested, with many Montenegrins who favored an independent state opposing the union. The circumstances surrounding the assembly and its legitimacy remain a subject of historical debate and continue to fuel political divisions in modern Montenegro.

The unification with Serbia led to the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Montenegro ceased to exist as a separate political entity. This period was marked by political централизация and Serbian dominance, which led to discontent and resistance in Montenegro. The loss of statehood after centuries of struggle for independence was a bitter pill for many Montenegrins and left a lasting legacy of division and resentment.

The interwar period in Yugoslavia was characterized by political instability, ethnic tensions, and economic difficulties. Montenegro, as part of the new kingdom, experienced its share of these problems. Political life was dominated by the centralist policies of the Belgrade government, and Montenegrin political aspirations were largely suppressed.

World War II brought immense suffering and further upheaval to Montenegro. The country was occupied by Italian and later German forces. The war also saw the rise of competing resistance movements: the Yugoslav Partisans led by Josip Broz Tito, and the Chetniks, a Serbian nationalist movement. Montenegro became a battleground between these forces, as well as against the occupying powers. The Partisans, with their vision of a socialist, federal Yugoslavia, gained significant support in Montenegro.

Following the end of World War II, Montenegro became one of the six constituent republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under the leadership of Tito and the Communist Party. This period saw significant social and economic changes, including industrialization, urbanization, and improvements in education and healthcare. Montenegro, as a less developed region, received significant investment from the federal government.

Politically, Montenegro was governed by the League of Communists of Montenegro, the republican branch of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. While the federal

structure of Yugoslavia granted some degree of autonomy to the republics, real power resided with the centralized leadership in Belgrade and the Communist Party. Dissent was suppressed, and political life was tightly controlled.

However, even within the framework of socialist Yugoslavia, a distinct Montenegrin identity persisted. While closely linked to Serbian culture and history, Montenegrins maintained their own traditions, dialect, and a sense of a separate historical trajectory. The federal structure of Yugoslavia, paradoxically, also provided a framework for the recognition of Montenegro as a distinct entity within the federation.

The late 20th century brought the unraveling of Yugoslavia. The death of Tito in 1980 was followed by rising nationalism and political and economic crises in the constituent republics. As Yugoslavia began to disintegrate in the early 1990s, Montenegro faced a critical choice about its future.

Unlike other Yugoslav republics that actively sought independence, Montenegro initially remained in a union with Serbia, forming the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. This decision was influenced by a number of factors, including historical ties, a large Serbian minority in Montenegro, and the political leadership at the time, which was closely aligned with Slobodan Milošević's regime in Serbia.

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was dominated by Serbia and was largely isolated internationally during the 1990s due to the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Montenegro's relationship with Serbia within this union became increasingly strained over time. Many Montenegrins felt that their interests were being marginalized and that the union was hindering Montenegro's progress.

This growing discontent fueled a movement for Montenegrin independence. Led by figures like Milo Đukanović, who had transitioned from a close ally of Milošević to a proponent of Montenegrin sovereignty, the movement gained momentum. The political landscape in Montenegro became increasingly polarized between those who favored remaining in a union with Serbia and those who advocated for full independence.

In 2003, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was transformed into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, a looser confederation. However, this arrangement proved to be short-lived. The independence movement in Montenegro continued to grow, advocating for a referendum on statehood.

The path to the 2006 independence referendum was a complex process, involving negotiations with Serbia and the European Union. The EU played a significant role in facilitating the process and setting the conditions for the referendum, including the requirement for a 55% majority for independence to be successful.

On May 21, 2006, the referendum was held. Despite intense campaigning from both sides, a majority of Montenegrin citizens voted in favor of independence. The result was narrow but decisive, with 55.5% voting "yes." This historic vote marked the culmination of centuries of Montenegrin history and the re-establishment of its sovereignty as an independent state.

The declaration of independence on June 3, 2006, was a watershed moment. Montenegro, after periods of autonomy, incorporation into larger states, and a union with Serbia, once again took its place on the world stage as a sovereign nation. This event set the stage for the development of its modern political system and its efforts to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. The historical journey, from early Slavic tribes and the state of Duklja to the challenges of Ottoman rule, the unique institution of the Prince-Bishops, the brief period as a kingdom, and the complex Yugoslav era, all contributed to shaping the identity and political aspirations of Montenegro as it embarked on its new chapter as an independent state. Understanding these historical foundations is essential to comprehending the political dynamics and challenges that Montenegro faces today.

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