

A Brief Note on the Effect of Montenegrin Independence on Language

1 There is a traditional Balkan sentiment, perhaps apparent especially in Serbia, that Montenegrins and Serbs are a single people united by religion, tradition and language. It is true that the 1974 constitution of Yugoslavia acknowledged the existence of a specifically Montenegrin literary standard; namely the “Eastern variant” of the Serbo-Croatian language based on *ijekavian* pronunciation and spelling, with a lexical corpus shared with the Serbo-Croatian of Serbia.¹ Nevertheless, as Greenberg notes, “the Montenegrins did not produce any separate grammars, orthographic manuals, or school handbooks for their language during the years of Socialist Yugoslavia. The impetus for the birth of a separate Montenegrin language remained dormant until 1994, after it became obvious that Serbo-Croatian no longer existed”².

2 From that point in 1994, however, in the context of an imploding Yugoslavia, a school of thought led by an academic named Vojislav Nikčević began to advocate the adoption of a separate Montenegrin language, independent of Serbian. As part of this drive, Nikčević and his allies have created an Institute for Montenegrin Language and have endeavoured to construct separate Montenegrin traditions – hitherto largely unencountered, it has to be said. This advocacy ran in parallel to the incipient drive towards independence for Montenegro, ultimately achieved in May 2006 – though it would be too simplistic to state that those in favour of independence from Serbia have also been those in favour of linguistic separation too. The most visible marker of a separate Montenegrin language would be the addition of three letters over and above the 30 found in the standard Serbo-Croatian inventory for Serbian, these letters apparently being necessary to reflect the language as spoken in Montenegro:

Cyrillic

s	a new letter № 9 in the Cyrillic inventory
ć	a new letter № 11 in the Cyrillic inventory
3+acute	a new letter № 33 in the Cyrillic inventory

Roman

3
ś
dz

¹ See *Language Evolution in Bosnia*, PCGN, August 2006, <http://www.pcn.org.uk/Bosnia-Aug06.pdf>, p8.

² *Language and Identity in the Balkans*, R D Greenberg, Oxford University Press, 2004; ISBN 0199258155; p89.

3 The Montenegro government website³ is interestingly in Roman script, in a language referred to as *crnogorski*; that is to say, Montenegrin⁴. However, a cursory look at the website reveals none of the three additional letters which might help confirm the nature of this language as Montenegrin. Instead, the texts are written in the standard *ijekavian* version of the traditional Eastern variant of Serbo-Croatian, in the same way as determined by the 1974 constitution of Yugoslavia. There would therefore appear to be nothing “new” in the language as found on this government website. Given that standard Serbian, while also using the traditional Eastern variant, now exclusively uses its *ekavian* version, a *de facto* split along *ijekavian-ekavian* lines does exist between the language as encountered in Montenegro and that as encountered in Serbia. But this is nothing new and has not usually been considered sufficient to constitute a difference of language label.

4 As mentioned in paragraph 3, the website of the government of Montenegro is in Roman script, not Cyrillic. It was noticeable during the run-up to the referendum which resulted in a narrow decision in favour of independence that the campaign literature was in a mix of Cyrillic and Roman scripts. As with the case for linguistic separation, however, it would be too simplistic to state that those in favour of independence always used Roman script whilst those favouring a continued union with Serbia favoured Cyrillic. There was certainly a significant correspondence, but by no means a universal one. There is no clear division between those favouring independence and those against it when it comes either to the name of the country’s language or the script in which that language should be written. Having said that, it is interesting to note that the Montenegrin army has recently been ordered to write all documents in Roman⁵.

5 It is quite possible that political expediency may at some point dictate that the current language of Montenegro should be called “Montenegrin” – just as under certain circumstances it is diplomatic to label the Romanian language used in Moldova as “Moldovan”⁶. That point may even arrive quite soon; already Prime Minister Đukanović has indicated his expectation that Montenegrins will “politically call” their language Montenegrin⁷. Certainly, independence has led to charges that using the Serbian language in Montenegro amounts to linguistic imperialism. Also being asked is whether texts in Serbian need to be turned into *ijekavian* form for use in Montenegro, and whether this would constitute translation – an action which would imply that the receiver language ought to possess a different label

6 There is no decision yet from within the country itself, with “Serbian”, “Montenegrin” and even the neutral (though inexplicit) term “Native” all being mooted as possible labels. It is perhaps safer to consider the principal language in today’s Montenegro to be “**Serbian in an *ijekavian* form**”. That definition does in any case effectively distinguish the language from that in Serbia – which is “**Serbian in an *ekavian* form**” – without providing the added degree of separation which might be needed if and when the language in Montenegro takes a more radically different course, for example by employing the three additional characters listed in paragraph 2.

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³ <http://www.vlada.cg.yu>; established in 2003, but now reflecting the current post-independence situation.

⁴ *Crnogorski* has also been used as the language label for three years on the ATMs of the Montenegrin Commercial Bank [BBC Monitoring report from the Montenegrin newspaper *Dan*, 23 March 2003].

⁵ BBC Monitoring report from the Montenegrin newspaper *Dan*, 24 June 2006.

⁶ See *Moldovan: An Identity but not a Language*, PCGN, December 2005, <http://www.pcgng.org.uk/Moldovan.pdf>.

⁷ BBC Monitoring report from the Montenegrin newspaper *Pobjeda*, 23 May 2006.