

Djukanovic Confounds Pollsters

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Montenegrin leader lives to fight another day after surprise local election triumph

The ruling pro-independence bloc led by Montenegrin president Milo Djukanovic defied expectations last week when it scored an important local election victory over parties favouring continued participation in the Yugoslav federation.

Djukanovic, whose position has recently been threatened over the independence issue, has been hugely bolstered by this electoral triumph. Now Belgrade and the international community will have to take his views on future relations between Serbia and Montenegro more seriously.

Following the elections, the Montenegrin independence bloc - the Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, Social Democratic Party, SDP, and the Montenegrin Liberal Alliance, LSCG - have the chance to form local governments in ten of the nineteen Montenegrin municipalities.

Parties advocating continued federation with Serbia - the Coalition Together for Yugoslavia, ZZJ - are likely to hold sway in eight municipalities, while an alliance of three ethnic-Albanian parties will probably take control over the southern town of Ulcinj.

The main local election battle took place in the town of Niksic and in Berane in the north and Kotor and Budva in the south. All pre-election forecasts suggested victory for the ZZJ led by Momir Bulatovic, head of the Socialist People's Party, SNP. However, the latter gained only Berane, and that by just one seat, while pro-independence supporters secured the other three.

The electoral results caught many analysts by surprise. Recently conducted opinion polls predicted that Djukanovic's coalition would lose to those political forces supporting continued alliance with Serbia.

In addition to facing electoral defeat, Djukanovic had a lot of other troubles on his plate.

For much of the last year, he has been facing accusations that he and his party were implicated in the "Nacional affair", which linked the president with a number of corruption scandals. Added to this a promised economic revival failed to emerge; the standard of living dropped; and the introduction of the euro raised the prices of staple products.

And in the political arena, DPS leaders seemed bent on a war of words with the LSCG, while the president's decision in March, under intense EU pressure, to maintain a joint state with Serbia led to a break up with the SDP and to the fall of prime minister Filip Vujanovic's government. Vujanovic is one of the president's closest associates.

All these factors seemed to be conspiring against a Djukanovic victory in the local elections, so how does one explain the turnaround?

One of the main reasons could lie in the DPS's election campaign. Eschewing large rallies and high profile meetings, the party pursued a more direct approach, with activists visiting remote villages. The president himself toured the northern municipalities, which are traditional supporters of the pro-Yugoslavia option.

He went out of this way to speak with people individually and explain the benefits of independence.

In addition, his grudging decision to agree to the continuation of a joint state with Serbia, known as the Belgrade agreement, worked in his favour, as it showed voters that he didn't want to completely break up the federation. People's Party leader Dragan Soc has long claimed that the president wanted to build "a Chinese Wall with Serbia".

"Instead of building a wall we have chosen to part ways with Serbia peacefully," DPS leaders repeated often during the campaign. They argued that the Belgrade bore this out and that they wanted a gradual and peaceful parting of the ways.

And there are other reasons for the surprise result. Just prior to the elections, the pro-Yugoslav parties gave way to pressure from the international community and Belgrade over the issue of transferring war criminals to The Hague. Although they had previously promised their supporters they would never give in to these demands, they voted for extradition legislation in the federal parliament, which did not go down well with voters.

On top of this, once the agreement on continued union with Serbia was signed, Djukanovic benefited from the fact that now the federation was secure Belgrade would not have to back the pro-Yugoslav parties in Montenegro as assiduously as it had done in the past.

Djukanovic has good reason to feel confident after these election results. Scandals and pro-Yugoslav support all seemed to have chipped away at his power base. Now things have been turned on their head - and he's a serious political player once again. While the ZZJ may remain a respectable force it is in no position to endanger him.

But the president's problems are not over. He still has to restore his alliance with the LSCG and SDP. They withdrew their support following the postponement of a referendum on independence, which was one of the stipulations of the Belgrade agreement. Should their coalition not be renewed Montenegro could face early parliamentary elections.

But, as analysts point out, having made such strides in the local elections, discussions with these parties should prove a whole lot easier.

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