

Montenegrin Voters Intimidated

Author: [IWPR](#)

Governing party pressures public sector employees to participate in leadership poll.

Montenegro's ruling party is putting pressure on state workers to vote in the forthcoming repeat round of presidential elections to ensure its candidate wins.

Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, is conducting a feverish campaign through party activists, directed at every section of society, to secure a turnout of at least 50 per cent, necessary for the February 9 ballot to be declared valid.

The December 22 presidential election was annulled because only 45.9 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballots, following an opposition boycott aimed at preventing the official candidate Filip Vujanovic from claiming victory.

A high-ranking government official told IWPR that state sector workers, regardless of their political affiliations, have come under particular pressure to vote. They say employees have been ordered to report details about their allocated polling stations to their bosses, as well as telling them details of family members with voting rights.

The IWPR source said he had witnessed a scene in which his superior "warned my colleagues not to come to work if they failed to vote on Sunday". The official said dismissal threats of this kind were not serious, but were still likely to achieve their intended effect.

As in the last ballot, the favourite for the forthcoming vote is Vujanovic, speaker of Montenegro's parliament, the candidate of the ruling coalition, which unites the DPS and the Social Democratic Party of Ranko Krivokapic.

Vujanovic is expected to win in the event of a valid poll, as the opposition cannot take part - their failure to do so in the first ballot disqualifying them from contesting the second.

They announced the first boycott after suffering a crushing defeat in parliamentary elections last October. Vujanovic's only remaining rivals are little-known representatives of minor parties and citizens' groups.

If the ballot fails again, the entire election process must be repeated once more, in which case the opposition will be allowed to participate, making the outcome of the election more uncertain.

The DPS calculates that the February election will be valid if party loyalists are boosted by the presence of at least 30,000 state employees in the polling booths, according to party sources.

Consequently, they say, DPS officials are insisting at internal party meetings that all state employees should be "repeatedly reminded" to ignore the opposition boycott calls and go to the polls.

Novak Vukcevic, a DPS official, told the media on January 23 that it was their "obligation to tell people

whose salaries come from the state budget that Montenegro must have its president". He added that "each new round of elections costs 1.5 million euro and the failure of the elections would be to their detriment".

Vukcevic denied that this amounted to forcing people to go and vote and a DPS spokesman, Predrag Sekulic, told the media the next day that the party had never exerted pressure on citizens to go to polling stations and "would not do that this time either".

But the experience of many state employees paints a different picture.

Dragan, an employee of the Montenegrin railways, told IWPR that a list of all workers who had not voted in December was circulating in company headquarters.

"I'm not comfortable about it because my name is probably on it," he said. "There are rumours that 60 per cent of railway employees did not use their voting rights, which is probably true, because most of them support the opposition Socialist People's Party."

Mirjana, a post office employee, said colleagues of hers who were active DPS members had compiled a list of post office workers in Podgorica who responded to the opposition call for an election boycott. "I don't think I'll lose my job, but I fear being transferred to a worse position, so I'll go to the polls," said Mirajana, an opposition supporter.

Slobodan Franovic, head of the Montenegrin Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, said he had received telephone calls from people complaining of pressure on them to vote but could not help them as they usually refuse to identify themselves. They can only monitor developments and act through the committee's lawyers in the event of dismissals.

The chief of the OSCE election monitoring mission, Nikolai Vultsanov, announced on January 24 that the organisation would present its findings on the conduct of the poll on February 10, the day after the election.

Regardless of the February poll result, the DPS recently announced that it plans to abolish the 50 per cent threshold - which is not normal practice in other western democracies - reducing the effectiveness of the election boycott as a political tactic.

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Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training

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