

## **Montenegrians Count Cost of Democracy**

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Repeated elections forced by boycotts and low turnouts, are running the republic's state coffers dry.

Having failed to elect a new president because of low turnout, Montenegro faces the prospect of at least one and probably two more elections, which are likely to make a severe dent in the meagre budget of this impoverished Balkan nation.

An election on Sunday, December 22, was ruled invalid under electoral commission rules because less than 50 per cent of the 456,891 voters went to the polls. This means another election must be held in January 2003 and if that fails, as expected, a third contest will take place in April.

The electoral commission has estimated the cost of each election at 1.5 million euros, which covers printing election material and paying some 400 members of municipal electoral commissions and around 10,000 members of 1,102 electoral boards.

If two more presidential contests are added to the recent parliamentary and local elections, then the total bill could reach some seven million euros, a large sum in a country where the average monthly wage is just over 100 euros.

The front runner for president, Filip Vujanovic, backed by the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, and the smaller Social Democratic Party, SDP, would easily have won the election had the opposition not ordered its followers to boycott the polls. By taking advantage of the 50 per cent rule, the opposition coalition, Together for Change, and the smaller Liberal Alliance, LS, spared themselves from certain defeat.

The parliamentary elections of October 20 brought resounding victory to the DPS and the SDP, led by Milo Djukanovic and Ranko Krivokapic respectively. The two parties formed a coalition government and contested the presidential election under the banner "Coalition For a European Montenegro DPS-SDP".

The Centre for Monitoring Elections estimated turnout at 45.9 per cent. The Centre for Democratic Transition put it at 46.2 per cent. To make the election successful, a further 18,000 votes would have been needed. The ruling coalition captured 176,000 votes, confirming its success in the parliamentary elections.

Had the 50 per cent mark been exceeded on Sunday, the coalition candidate Filip Vujanovic would have won an absolute majority in the first round. The remaining 10 candidates, mostly anonymous representatives of groups of citizens and minor non-parliamentary parties, jointly polled less than 30,000 votes.

Only those whose candidacy has already been confirmed will be allowed to compete in the second election in late January. This means the opposition's candidate will again be excluded from the ballot. Analysts therefore expect that a boycott will be repeated, causing the election to fail. That would prompt a third election, in which new candidates would be allowed to stand, probably in the spring.

Political analyst Srdjan Darmanovic, director of the Podgorica Center for Democracy and Human rights, CEDEM, believes the contest will go to a third round. "Maybe these missing 20,000 votes seem a small figure, but in Montenegro it is significant," Darmanovic said. "I expect the second round to fail."

Speaking on Sunday evening, Darmanovic said the republic's 50 per cent requirement for presidential elections must be changed. "It is hard to expect over 50 per cent participation in elections because some 20 to 30 percent of voters regularly abstain," he said. "Any parties which decide to boycott the elections have automatic backing from 25-30 per cent of the electorate. It's too easy to do this."

The 50 per cent rule for a presidential election is rare in other democracies. It does not exist in western Europe while in eastern Europe and beyond only Ukraine, Serbia and Kazakhstan have the same requirement.

It seems likely that Montenegro's law will eventually be changed because the minimum turnout requirement destabilises a budget heavily dependent on aid donations from the US and the EU.

The president of the electoral commission, Branislav Radulovic, confirmed on December 19 that the state has so far paid only 160,000 euros, which is about 10 per cent of the estimated cost of Sunday's election. "We have not paid the suppliers of electoral materials, or the electoral boards and municipal electoral commissions," Radulovic said.

The poor health of the budget was evident from the fact that the state had problems financing the October parliamentary elections, which also were believed to have cost 1.5 million euros. On that occasion, the government decided to raid the aid budget for non-government organisations. It took out 300,000 euros that it was legally obliged to pay as campaign expenses to the different parties. After these elections, the non-government organisations got back their funds, but only because they had been taken from the account devoted to organising the population census.

The census is meant to be held every ten years but was last conducted in 1991. It has already been postponed for two years because of parliamentary elections in 2001 and 2002.

Just a year and a half after the early parliamentary ballot of April 22, 2001, new elections had to be held on October 20 this year. On top of this came the municipal elections of May 15. Add these to the likely cost of repeated presidential elections and the total comes to about seven million euros in less than two years. This sum does not include the vast funds spent by parties in their campaigns.

This sum is more than enough to build a major bridge in Podgorica that has been awaited for almost a decade. It would also be enough to save the numerous small companies which never recovered from UN sanctions imposed in 1992.

Petar Ivanovic, director of the Institute for Strategic Studies and Forecasting, told IWPR that repetition of the elections is ruinous for the country, " It will seriously damage the economy - people will be deprived of new investments, loans and jobs. "

Nebojsa Medojevic, director of the Centre for Transition, told IWPR, "The Montenegrin economy can't stand much more of this. In the last ten years, we've spent more than 20 million euro on 14 elections. Few other countries hold as many ballots as us."

Even though he was not elected president, Vujanovic will take office as temporary head of state because the constitution decrees that the parliamentary speaker should hold the post until a president has been elected.

Vujanovic, deputy leader of Djukanovic's DPS, was appointed speaker of Montenegro's parliament at the beginning of November, following the parliamentary elections. Five years before that, he was prime

minister of Montenegro. He assumed the role of temporary president on November 25, after Djukanovic resigned the post and became prime minister designate of the new government.

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