

Montenegro: Disillusionment with Political Leaders Mounts

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Public frustration with the country's main political parties likely to lead to a poor turn out in forthcoming local poll.

Montenegrins disillusioned by the two most powerful parties representing independence and Yugoslav blocks are likely to abstain in droves from forthcoming local elections, forcing them into unexpected coalitions.

A recent survey by the Montenegrin agency DAMAR suggests up to 20 per cent of the electorate will not turn out for the May 15 ballot. This is sharply up on last April's figure, when only 8 per cent of the electorate failed to vote in parliamentary elections.

It is already clear that the pro-independence Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, led by President Milo Djukanovic as well as its bitter rival pro-Yugoslav Socialist People's Party, SNP, headed by Predrag Bulatovic are likely to suffer the most.

Many of their staunch supporters believe that they have been let down since both parties deviated from their respective political platforms they have been advocating for years.

After May 15, Montenegro will probably have fewer parties at the local level capable of running local municipalities on their own. Therefore, it is expected that surprising coalitions may be formed at the local level. And if the pro-independence option suffers a considerable loss of public support, fresh general elections may become inevitable.

Montenegro's electorate has been sharply divided for years into the two rival camps - one supporting Montenegro's independence and the other advocating joint state with Serbia.

Djukanovic built his public reputation on a pro-independence programme. He enjoyed international support for the idea while Slobodan Milosevic was in power. But after the fall of the regime in 2000, the international community reversed its policy and began to oppose Montenegrin independence.

Djukanovic's supporters were bewildered when he recently caved in to pressure from the European Union and abandoned a long-standing pledge to hold a referendum on independence.

In the presence of the EU envoy, Javier Solana, Djukanovic signed an agreement in Belgrade on March 14 that pledged to preserve a joint Serb-Montenegrin state.

The consequence was turmoil within the ranks of the ruling coalition. Djukanovic's coalition partner, the Social Democrats, SDP, walked out of the government, while the Liberal Alliance, LS, the most consistent champion of independence, withdrew support for the minority government.

The signing of the Belgrade agreement will almost certainly result in a loss of support for Djukanovic at the polls, as many erstwhile supporters look on his action as treason. They have already made their anger felt by holding noisy protests for several days outside the Montenegrin parliament.

The results in DPS strongholds, such as Niksic, Bijelo Polje and the coastal town of Budva, will arouse particular interest. If the DPS loses its majority in these key municipalities, it will be seen as proof that the pro-independence movement is running out of steam.

In addition to lower voter turnout, some former DPS voters may turn to the LS, which previously only garnered 7 to 9 per cent of the votes.

The main party of the rival pro-Yugoslav block would have probably welcome this, if SNP did not have its own problem with disappointed supporters. For more than a decade it supported the hard line Serbian nationalism of Slobodan Milosevic and after his fall it vehemently opposed the extradition of war crimes suspects to The Hague.

However, although Bulatovic publicly pledged never to endorse the extradition of Yugoslav citizens, his party, which is in coalition with the ruling Serbian political bloc DOS at the federal level, voted on April 15 to adopt the controversial legislation on cooperation with the tribunal.

The federal parliament passed the law under strong international pressure, especially from the United States, which made financial aid to Yugoslavia conditional on the surrender of key war crimes suspects.

The SNP previously blocked the passage of this legislation twice at the federal level, fearing an angry reaction from pro-Serbian supporters in the northern part of the republic.

Its fears were justified, as there were indeed bitter reactions and protests in the Montenegrin north, traditional stronghold of pro-Serb option.

The SNP may now see some voters drifting to the camp of the ultra-Serbian nationalist Radical Party, led by Vojislav Seselj, and the People's Socialist Party, headed by Momir Bulatovic, which will field candidates under the banner of a "Patriotic Coalition for Yugoslavia". Both parties have accused the SNP of "betraying the national interest".

The suicide of the former interior minister from the Milosevic era, Vljako Stojiljkovic, who shot himself on the day parliament passed the tribunal legislation, may encourage such voters to switch allegiance.

Milos Obrenic, SNP candidate in Pljevlja, in northern Montenegro, withdrew from the contest after the suicide, claiming he could not accept this "denial of our historical values... and betrayal of our heroes and warriors".

Aleksandar Vucic, the Radicals' vice-president, has come to Montenegro from Belgrade to run the election campaign, regularly accusing SNP leader, Predrag Bulatovic, of treason. As IWPR found out, the aim of "Patriotic Coalition for Yugoslavia" is to penetrate the structures of municipal authorities in Montenegro, where they have not been represented so far.

A source from the coalition told IWPR that they don't expect to gain more than 2 to 3 per cent, but they are certain that they will take it from SNP.

Despite the serious blows to the support of DPS and SNP, the prevailing view is that the pro-Yugoslav

option will gain more ground in Montenegro. The most recent survey by the Centre for Democracy in Podgorica in April suggested support had grown for the federal option. The survey suggested 61 per cent of voters now favoured preserving a joint state with Serbia.

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