

## **LOCAL ELECTIONS IN MONTENEGRO**

**(JUNE 2000)**

### **Background**

Extraordinary local elections were held on 11 June in two Montenegrin municipalities – the small coastal town of Herceg Novi and the republic's capital, Podgorica – following the withdrawal by the Liberal Alliance from the coalitions running their councils. (At the republican level the Liberals continue to be part of the government led by President Milo Djukanovic's Party of Democratic Socialists or DPS.)

With one-third of Montenegro's entire electorate between them, interest in their outcome both inside and outside the country was high, as presenting the first real test of Djukanovic's and the DPS's popularity since parliamentary elections two years earlier. In that time, their studiously pro-Western and anti-Belgrade policies had meant that Montenegro stayed more-or-less neutral during the war in Kosovo (with Djukanovic always referring to Nato's "intervention" rather than "aggression") and had even resulted in the introduction of the German mark as the republic's parallel currency.

Earlier hints, however, that Montenegro's new rulers would go the whole hog and hold a referendum on complete independence have been toned down – not least because the EU and US, despite strong diplomatic and financial support for Djukanovic, appear to have decided that they have enough to deal with right now patching up not only Kosovo but also Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania (all three of which, in fact, border Montenegro).

But the other restraining factor has been the surprising degree of resilience shown by the Socialist People's Party (SNP) of Federal Yugoslav prime minister, Momir Bulatovic. Although both patronized and demonized by the Western as well as very nearly all the Montenegrin media (one Reuters report on a pre-election Bulatovic rally referred to an audience consisting of "families and pensioners, rural people, unhappy with the present, nostalgic for the past and scared of the future"), supporters of the SNP are clearly still active and numerous enough for the result of any such referendum to be a far from foregone conclusion.

### **Campaign**

As in the 1998 parliamentary elections, the only posters on view round Podgorica were for the "For a Better Life – Milo Djukanovic" coalition comprising the DPS. Glossy and ubiquitous, rather than featuring faces of the party's leadership, these tended to show ordinary citizens going about their business against backdrops of the city being lavishly rebuilt.

Although the last couple of years have clearly brought some improvements to Podgorica, most notably a new bridge funded by the EU (ironically right over the SNP's headquarters), the main theme of the DPS's campaign – that they have put the country firmly on the path to prosperity – is unlikely to have been credible with most voters. Salaries and pensions may be higher than in Serbia (again mostly thanks to direct payments from the international community), but so too as a result of the latter's economic blockade are prices. Factories which once produced for the immeasurably larger Serbian market are now virtually dormant, while the only obvious beneficiaries from Djukanovic's much-vaunted reforms are the highly visible 20,000 or so policemen who appear to spend most of their time taking bribes off drivers.

Within Montenegro, Djukanovic again campaigned strongly on the ticket of an open multi-ethnic society and went out of his way to court the votes of the country's Albanian minority. This time the latter had their own "Alliance for Malesia" (the Albanian name for the area in south-west Montenegro where most of them live) which is pressing for the town of Tuzi and neighbouring villages to be given their own municipality. Like the newly-built mosques and *medresa* in this area, that may come. For now, though, it was clearly in the DPS's interest to be able to count on these 8,000 or so Albanian voters to boost their position in Podgorica (the total electorate of which is 112,000).

But Djukanovic's main contribution to the campaign took the form of meetings with the Western statesmen who are supposed to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his policies. A week before voting he was received for 90 minutes by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Earlier, the head of the EU's Balkan Stability Pact, Bodo Hombach, in addition to refusing to meet with members of the opposition, assured Djukanovic that in spite of its not being a sovereign state Montenegro would be allowed to take part in the Thessaloniki summit in July as a full participant.

In general, despite the high level of anticipation surrounding these elections and the pronounced polarization of society, the campaign passed off without incident – the main exception being the physical assault of a leading Liberal Alliance politician by Djukanovic's brother. For its part the SNP complained that members of their "For Yugoslavia – Momir Bulatovic" coalition had been hindered by police from traveling freely round the republic to hold rallies. They also said that they had been contacted by a number of voters who had been offered payments by state officials, and asked to help in initiating legal proceedings against them.

Their main problem, again as in the 1997 presidential and 1998 parliamentary elections (see BHHRG reports), seems to have been an absence of publicity stemming from the Montenegrin media's near-total backing for Djukanovic. Attempts to develop a radio station out of *Dan*, the one paper sympathetic to the SNP, have so far been blocked by the authorities, while the signals of Serbian TV and – to a somewhat lesser extent – TV "YU Info" continue to be jammed in most parts of the republic. (Belgrade-published newspapers, by contrast, do seem to be getting through.) Excluded from the better sites around the capital, the "For Yugoslavia" coalition saw no point in putting up any posters, so that many voters will have been all the more puzzled by the tens of thousands of "For JULoslavia" posters that appeared round town the day before voting (in clear breach of the pre-polling silent period). The aim, obviously, was to scare away SNP voters by playing up the party's alliance with Mrs. Milosevic's far less popular JUL.

Otherwise, the campaign was overshadowed by the assassination two weeks before voting of President Djukanovic's national security advisor: Goran Zujic. While unable to offer an explanation for this murder, the PDS has been at pains to deny that it marks the onset of a spate of gangland-style political executions similar to those that have been racking Serbia. The SNP also refrained from making much out of the incident, but noted that the criminal connections of the country's rulers makes life for all its citizens insecure.

### **Voting-day**

Procedures were the same as in the 1998 parliamentary elections – including the use of a spray to show if someone had already voted and a transparent ballot-box. Ballot-papers themselves, already carrying one official seal, had to be stamped again prior to being given to a voter, who after making his choice had to tear off a serialized strip on each voting-slip which would later be counted separately.

These arguably over-elaborate mechanisms meant that voting proceeded (sometimes painfully) slowly, but fears of over-crowding and disorder proved groundless – even without a police presence in any of the polling stations visited. Moreover, the main bone of contention in 1997

and 1998, the electoral register, appears to have been largely overcome thanks to a new law on voters' lists carried through with the support of the opposition. On this occasion only an average of three or four people per polling station seemed unable to find their names on the register.

One other less welcome innovation is the practice of the commission president shouting out the three-digit number in the register beside each voter's name as the ballot-paper is handed over. Party observers would cross this number off from sheets with numerical sequences running from 1 to 700 (the average number of voters per polling station). Though this gave the impression of a bingo-hall, the reality is less innocent as later comparison between these numbers and the electoral register would enable parties to know precisely who voted.

But stronger criticism should be reserved for the fact that three out of the five members of each polling station commission were members of the DPS. The party can argue that this is no more than a reflection of its superior numbers in government (and its headquarters in Podgorica are in fact located in the government's main building.) But having such one-sided representation of these commissions has been loudly criticized by the OSCE in other countries, and was hardly likely to increase the confidence of the opposition in the electoral process.

In practice, however, problems on voting-day were largely limited to the Albanian-populated areas, where one polling-station had to be temporarily closed when a dispute broke out between commission members. In another that we visited, a school with a picture in its hall of Rexhep Qosja (one of Kosovo's longest-standing champions of the cause of independence), there was clear evidence of family-voting occurring – made easier by the fact that voters were "signing" their names in the register with a thumb-print. None of this seemed to be considered unusual by the representative of CEMI – a local NGO (partly-funded by US AID) which had observers, usually between the ages of 20 and 25 and wearing bright orange T-shirts, in all of Podgorica's 207 polling-stations.

## Results

On this occasion the polls proved to be accurate. Podgorica was won outright by the "For a Better Life" coalition (which took 28 out of the city council's 54 seats to "For Yugoslavia"'s 22), while in Herceg Novi positions were reversed (with Bulatovic's coalition winning 19 out of 35 seats to Djukanovic's 14). The gamble – if that is what it was – of the Liberal Alliance hardly paid off, as they won just four seats in Podgorica and two in Herceg Novi. Also unsurprisingly, the Albanian coalition collected just 1,500 votes, thereby demonstrating that for this minority autonomy is all very well but subsidies are even better. Indeed, the only surprise was the very high turn-out, which at almost 80 per cent in Podgorica points to a degree of politicization greater than anywhere else in the former Yugoslavia.

Reactions from the two main political forces were interesting, as the DPS's obvious joy at improving their position in the country's capital (with the increased scope for patronage that goes with it) was tempered by frustration at their failure on the coast. They blamed their defeat there on the high proportion of war veterans and pensioners – as though these groups have no right to their opinions. The party was also resentful of the lack of gratitude shown by the several thousand refugees who settled in Herceg Novi soon after the outbreak of war in 1991. However, judging by the dreadful conditions in which thousands of Serbian and Roma refugees forced out of Kosovo last year are living on the outskirts of Podgorica, their anger at the Montenegrin authorities may be justified. For its part, the SNP again failed to live up to its reputation by *not* going on the rampage through the streets of Podgorica as the results came through. Instead, the "For Yugoslavia" coalition's candidate for mayor, Predrag Bulatovic, reacted entirely rationally by resigning as its leader in Podgorica.

## **Implications**

This last move will no doubt give rise to speculation that the “moderates” within the SNP (of which Predrag Bulatovic was considered to be one) will be driven out by proxies of the Milosevices and Vojislav Seselj in Belgrade determined to force the issue of a referendum to a head. This is unlikely to happen, however. Not because they are afraid of the outcome – as any such vote they would almost certainly win; rather since Montenegro is currently part of the Yugoslav federation, there is simply no point for them pushing for something they have already.

On the other hand, federal elections had already been promised by Momir Bulatovic to take place before the end of the year. These will be important as the DPS has long complained that it is not properly represented at this level, which is what enables both Bulatovic and Milosevic to hang onto their positions.

So the (very) mixed results of these local elections are a cause for concern both for them and their Western cheerleaders. The latter have responded by effectively calling on the DPS to get its act together. Among them the principal architect of Nato’s bombing campaign against Serbia, Javier Solana, was quoted as saying that “[This] is a challenge for Western countries to tailor support so that it really encourages reform and structural changes that benefit ordinary people”. Why “ordinary people” have not already benefited from the massive sums of money pumped into Montenegro over the last few years, Solana declined to speculate. There is, though, a genuine problem for the republic’s Western sponsors, in that its strange status as a semi-independent state fails – much to everyone’s dissatisfaction – to qualify it for World Bank or IMF assistance. This may explain why the ever thoughtful George Soros has recently established the first international bank in Montenegro, which will have initial capital of \$ 5 million.