

Political disaffection spreads throughout the former Yugoslavia

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The failure of the presidential poll in Montenegro at the end of December has deepened the crisis of the political establishment in the former Yugoslavia.

Only 46 percent of the 460,000-strong electorate turned out to vote, short of the 50 percent minimum required for validation. A similar problem has beset attempts to elect a president in Serbia. Consequently, the two republics—which are part of a loose federation following ratification of the European Union’s Belgrade Agreement in March 2002—are both without bona fide heads of state.

The low turnout was partially influenced by the boycott organised by the main opposition party, the pro-Yugoslav Socialist Peoples Party (SNP). This meant that the secessionist Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) polled 85 percent of the votes cast. The other contestants were made up of fringe parties with the nearest rival to the DPS candidate, Filip Vujanovic, receiving just 5.9 percent of the poll. The second round of voting is unlikely to produce a valid result, as only candidates who stood in the first round can participate in the run-off.

DPS leader Milo Djukanovic declared the result as further proof of a growing momentum towards outright separation. Djukanovic had been elected president last October, but stood down to take up the position of prime minister, which has more power.

Djukanovic’s claims are disproved by the huge abstention rate. As for the main opposition party and its leader Predrag Bulatovic, there exists little enthusiasm for their perspective of returning to the past and its association with the Milosevic era. Unable to win widespread support, they are reduced to spoiling tactics. As one political analyst noted, “Any parties which decide to boycott the elections have the automatic backing from 25-30 percent of the electorate. It’s too easy to do this” (Srdjan Darmanovic, director of the Podgorica Center for Democracy and Human Rights, CEDEM).

The general antipathy towards the political

establishment can also be explained by the fact that it was not so long ago that Djukanovic, Bulatovic and Milosevic were political colleagues. The move towards separatism received its main impetus from external pressures rather than local demand. In the last referendum to be held on the issue in 1992, a majority of 96 percent voted to remain within a common state with Serbia after all the other republics had broken away. It was on this basis that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was created in April 1992.

Although never committing themselves to endorsing outright separation, the secessionist movement was encouraged by the US and Europe as part of their efforts to destabilise the government in Belgrade and increase Serbia’s isolation. The international economic embargo on Yugoslavia was circumvented by the generous amounts of Western aid that were pumped into Montenegro from the late ’90s. Under Djukanovic’s presidency the republic was afforded international recognition normally reserved for sovereign states—with a seat at international and regional institutions.

Throughout this period there was never any proof that a referendum on separation would carry more than half the population. The DPS has only remained in power due to its coalition with the smaller and more nationalist parties. It lost its slender majority last year, however, forcing parliamentary elections following the withdrawal of the Liberal Alliance (LS). The LS accused Djukanovic of renegeing on promises to call a referendum after he co-signed the Belgrade Agreement, which postpones any decision on final separation for three years.

The DPS won re-election after Djukanovic claimed his close connection with the major powers was the main guarantor for Montenegro finally achieving independence. “With enough perseverance, responsibility and a bit of luck, Montenegro will be independent and internationally recognised,” Djukanovic claimed.

During the election, Djukanovic had also pledged to stamp out governmental corruption. It did not take long for his promise to be exposed as empty. One of the first measures he undertook was to remove the interior minister, Andrija Jovicevic, who had begun a criminal investigation into high-level involvement in human trafficking, which had already resulted in the arrest of the deputy public prosecutor, Zoran Piperovic. Djukanovic proposed to replace Jovicevic with a former secret service chief, causing at least one journalist to accuse the government of attempting to hush up the scandal.

The allegations of sexual slavery that have implicated a number of senior officials is symptomatic of the state of Montenegro. Criminal enterprise accounts for the bulk of the republic's wealth creation, as it has become a major transit route for smuggling into western Europe. Djukanovic and his family are deeply implicated in tobacco smuggling, which accounts for 60 percent of the country's GDP. Such is the wealth amassed by Djukanovic through such activities that even some of his political allies have nicknamed him "King Milo".

In contrast, much of the population is fighting for subsistence. The unemployment rate stands at 30 percent, although the unofficial figures are probably far higher. Those who remain employed do not fair much better. Two-thirds of workers earn between 100 and 200 euros a month, while the monthly cost of basic food and groceries for a family of four is estimated at 250 euros.

The EU had made explicit its opposition to any further moves to separation, which is now seen as counterproductive to the drive to integrate the region into the European Single Market and open it up to the major banks and transnationals. The European Commission announced recently that it would not accept Serbia and Montenegro maintaining separate currencies, tariffs and customs. This breached the requirements of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement that established the criteria for Balkan countries applying for EU membership, the EC said.

The EC's ruling generated friction between Djukanovic and the EC Commissioner for External Affairs, Chris Patten, which the SNP has sought to exploit. SNP leader Bulatovic said it proved that Djukanovic was "no longer a favourite of the international community".

Rather than address the underlying causes of the widespread alienation from the political establishment exposed in December's election, the response of Western institutions and media commentators has been to call for the validation benchmark to be lowered.

Srdjan Darmanovic, *Povjerenik* in the stated that the 50 percent threshold "turns today's political process in Serbia into a grotesque torment of the electorate and brings ugly complications and uncertainties. The same electoral provision could lead to the failure of elections in Montenegro."

Similar calls have been made following the last two attempts to hold presidential elections in Serbia, which has the same voter-turnout requirement. In fact the law was amended after the first election to remove the 50 percent rule for the run off. Under this new law, the threshold only applied to the first round. This, however, still failed as the first round on December 8 only produced a 45 percent turnout.

This demand is likely to gather pace in Montenegro. If there are two more rounds of elections as expected, Montenegro will have spent some €7 million on elections in the last two years. This is in a republic where the average monthly wage is just over €100. The state has already had problems meeting the cost of October's elections, and had been forced to borrow from the aid budget for non-governmental organisations. Those organisations were eventually repaid from an account dedicated to organising a population census, which has now been postponed due to lack of finance.

Rather than risk further exposure that all leaders the west has actively promoted as "saviours" of the Balkans are widely mistrusted amongst the Yugoslav people at large, the EU are considering lowering the threshold. Nikolai Vulchanov of the European Security organisation, the OSCE, has stated, "In view of the failed presidential elections in Serbia and Montenegro ... consideration should be given to removing any provision making possible an endless cycle of repeated elections. The possibility of repeating elections indefinitely invites boycotts and carries the risk of protracted political instability."



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