

Official opposition protests Montenegro presidential election result

Ognjen Markovic
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Following the very narrow result in the presidential elections held on April 7 in Montenegro, the official opposition has lodged protests claiming voting irregularities and fraud. At a protest rally on April 20, the losing candidate called for the invalidation of the ballot and new elections. Politically, the almost evenly split vote reflects both widespread hostility to the ruling party and the incapacity of the opposition to successfully capitalize on public opposition.

In the two-candidate presidential race, the incumbent Filip Vujanovic from the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) faced off against Miodrag Lekic, leader of the opposition Democratic Front (DF), who ran as an independent in an attempt to broaden his support.

The official result showed Vujanovic winning by 51.21 percent against Lekic's 48.79 percent, about an 8,000-vote margin. Voter turnout was 63.9 percent, down from 70.5 percent at the last election.

Lekic immediately claimed various irregularities, ranging from pre-election intimidation and vote buying, to suspicious voting through the mail. On this basis, the opposition decided not to accept the results and appealed to the election commission and courts. The appeal by the opposition was dismissed and it then organized a protest rally, claiming that “the most brutal electoral theft” had taken place in what was nothing less than an “obvious and devastating coup”.

Up to 10,000 people gathered for the protest last week, a relatively significant number for Montenegro with a population of just 650,000. At the protest Lekic and his supporters called upon the prime minister, the president of parliament and the heads of political parties to annul the elections and call a new vote within 10 days. Otherwise, they threatened, they would organise even larger demonstrations.

The protest was ended by playing “Ode to Joy”, the anthem of the European Union. This was in line with the

opposition's policy of promoting illusions in the EU and appealing for support from the “international community” and “European institutions”.

Speaking of behalf of the EU, Petar Stano, spokesman for the EU Enlargement Commission, was forced to concede that “mistrust in public institutions and the judiciary diminished public confidence in the electoral process,” and instructed “all political parties in Montenegro to work constructively within Montenegrin institutions and undertake measures which increase public trust in them.” He then gave an official seal of approval to the result of the vote, overseen by international observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, declaring that the elections were “professionally and efficiently run”.

The EU statement stands in stark contrast to the reactions of various Western institutions to similar claims of electoral irregularities in many countries where imperialism has a stake in destabilizing the ruling regime, as was most recently shown in Venezuela. The explanation is obvious: the DPS regime has long served imperialist interests in the region and still has a role to play—for the time being.

The DPS is the successor party to the Stalinist League of Communists of Montenegro and has constantly ruled the tiny country for more than two decades. Its rule is best personified in the figure of Milo Djukanovic, the current prime minister. Once a leading member of the Stalinist youth organization, in the early 1990s he evolved into a Serbian chauvinist and supported Slobodan Milosevic.

However, in the late 1990s he made an abrupt turn to the West, lining up behind the NATO bombing of Serbia and unilaterally introducing the German deutsch mark and later the euro as currencies in Montenegro, to circumvent Serbia in the selloff of state assets on the international market.

One privatization in particular stands out as a vivid example of the lawless, predatory character of the whole process—that of Prva Banka. A BBC investigation revealed last year how the Djukanovic family bought a controlling stake and “treated the bank like an ATM machine. A wonderful source of cash”. The audit papers unearthed by the BBC showed “that most of the money deposited at the bank came from public funds, while two thirds of the loans it made went to the Djukanovics and their close associates.”

Montenegro was hit hard by the global financial crisis in 2008. Gross domestic product dropped 5.7 percent in 2009, and has recorded insignificant growth since. The DPS-led regime has worked to impose the burden of the crisis on the working class, most recently through a special levy of €1 per month on every mobile phone, electric power or cable TV connection. Also, under pressure from the IMF and the EU, the regime has repeatedly signalled its readiness to raise the sales tax, waiting merely for the best political opportunity.

Wages in the country are falling, while prices are constantly rising. The daily *Vijesti* reported last month that the average wage has fallen from €518 (US\$673) in January 2011 to €490 (\$637) in January 2013, with around half of the employed earning between €300 and €480. The average consumer basket, on the other hand, has risen in price from €751 to €799 in the same period. An average electricity bill is around €50, and rent about €200 per month.

The DPS has a long history of manipulating election results. In February, a scandal broke out when a recording was leaked in which Employment Bureau Director Zoran Jelic was recorded saying: “Through these projects, we will mainly employ DPS members ... we want primarily to employ our own people.” He claimed that every job represented five votes for DPS, since they pressure the persons employed to ensure their family members also vote DPS. It has been reported that any successful career is dependent on DPS membership, which is as high as 100,000—or more than one fifth of the electorate.

Cronyism, corruption and falling living standards have produced widespread hostility towards the DPS. In the general elections of October 2012, the DPS-led coalition failed to win the absolute majority for the first time, but stayed in power through the setting up of a post-election coalition with small ethnic minority parties. Notwithstanding its huge blackmailing apparatus, the DPS was barely able to stay in power last October but has now been able to secure the presidency.

This is due in large part to the nature of the opposition. It speaks only for upper middle class layers dissatisfied with the current distribution of wealth, which favours the richest 10 to 15 percent. Opposition candidate Lekic embodies this layer—a former diplomat who has spent the last decade in Italy as a university professor, and was largely unknown in Montenegro until recently. Media reports reveal his monthly household income to be around €4,000, over eight times the average wage in the country, and on a par with Vujanovic’s €3,700.

A significant part of Lekic’s DF comes from split-offs from the DPS. For a long time the main opposition party in Montenegro was the Socialist People’s Party (SNP), which broke off from the DPS in the late 1990s, on the basis of retaining strong ties with Serbia. After Montenegro’s independence from Serbia in 2006, the SNP adopted a secular, pro-European orientation, though it is still tainted by its nationalist past in the eyes of many voters. Now one faction of SNP has split and officially joined the DF, while the other is openly supportive, but chooses not to join just yet.

The DF remains committed to EU membership, and therefore to the austerity policies dictated by the EU. The DF’s economic program reads like any IMF manual, calling for “structural changes,” a “strong and competitive economic sector,” a law to regulate “fiscal responsibility” and the removal of numerous limitations and barriers” for investment. At pains to differentiate themselves from the DPS, the DF has been critical of some of the worst excesses in the privatization process and official corruption, but is in complete agreement with the basic premise that the working class must pay for the crisis of the profit system. That is why they were largely unable to mobilize wider layers of the working class and capitalize on the widespread hostility to DPS.

The working class in Montenegro does not need a new middle rank manager in the form of the DF, which would implement the EU austerity, but rather a decisive break with the whole framework of austerity represented on the European continent, above all by the reactionary EU and its institutions. Such a break is possible only on the basis of the internationalist and socialist program of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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