

**MONTENEGRO'S LOCAL ELECTIONS:
TESTING THE NATIONAL TEMPERATURE**

26 May 2000

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MAP OF SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

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MONTENEGRO'S LOCAL ELECTIONS: TESTING THE NATIONAL TEMPERATURE

I. INTRODUCTION¹

Local elections are to be held in Podgorica and Herceg-Novi, two of Montenegro's 21 municipalities, on 11 June 2000. Their significance is wider than the simple question of who governs the two local authorities, for these will be the first elections in Montenegro since the victory of the "For a Better Life" coalition (DZB) under president Milo Djukanovic in general elections in May 1998. For this reason the results will be widely interpreted as a comment on the performance of Djukanovic so far, and a barometer of the political mood in the republic as a whole.

The government did not want to hold these elections at this time. They were caused deliberately by the pro-independence Liberal Alliance (LSCG), who broke off 1998 local coalition agreements with the DZB in September 1999. The significance of these two localities is that they are the only places in Montenegro where the LSCG hold the balance of power. In most other municipalities either the DZB governs alone (11) or the Socialist People's Party (SNP) governs alone (4) or with allies (2). Exceptions are Ulcinj, where the Albanian parties Democratic Union of Albanians (DUA) and Democratic Alliance (DS) hold most of the seats, and Plav where the DZB is strongest but Bosniak and Albanian parties hold the balance.

The Liberals gave as the reason for breaking off the coalitions that they were unhappy with the way the DZB was running the municipalities, that pre-election claims had not been honoured. But they also felt – and it is universally believed that this was the real reason for forcing the elections – that the cause of Montenegrin independence was gaining public support, and that the Liberals' poll ratings were recovering from a bad result in 1998 – this is in essence the "change of public mood" referred to by LSCG leaders. The Liberals assert that there is little to choose between the two main opposing blocks in Montenegrin politics (DZB/SNP), and that a strong LSCG is the best guarantee of honest and principled

¹ A glossary of acronyms is attached, which also functions as a summary of political alignments.

government. So the LSCG hopes that a good result for them will put pressure on the government to move faster towards the long-mooted referendum on Montenegro's status, but also bring better, more open government at all levels. Still, with no chance of winning their best hope this time is to re-enter coalitions with the DZB, but from a position of increased strength and influence.

For the government, it will be useful if it can gain enough votes to govern the two municipalities without the LSCG. But its main need is to show that the support they it gained in 1998 is holding up. Politically DZB does not need to win either Podgorica or Herceg-Novi outright, since the Liberals have made it clear they will not work with the SNP, but it does need to be able to show that in the republic as a whole support for the reformist, internationalist course the DZB has followed is not crumbling.

For the pro-Yugoslavia SNP the stakes are higher still.² The government only needs to hold on to the level of support it already has, but the SNP must do better than in 1998. Victory in either election would strengthen the party's claim that its true support is much higher than published polls suggest, and that the government does not enjoy the support of a majority of voters. It would also give the SNP for the first time a municipality in the southern part of the country, important symbolically to show that their support is not confined to the highlands. Herceg-Novi looks the easier target, but Podgorica is the bigger prize: an SNP victory there would be a major embarrassment to the government. Even a close failure in Podgorica coupled with victory in Herceg-Novi would give the party a platform from which to call insistently for early general elections.³ But clear defeat in both places would demonstrate that voters still have faith in Djukanovic, that the pro-Yugoslavia and pro-Milosevic message is not gaining support.

European Union (EU) support for Djukanovic could hardly be clearer: commenting on a new package of EU aid on 8 May 2000, the EU's head of Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana called it an "excellent decision, bearing in mind important elections in Montenegro in June."⁴ EU Commissioner Chris Patten made a high-profile visit to Podgorica on 15 May. Americans by contrast have been keeping quiet and out of sight, but no-one doubts their support for Djukanovic.

Electoral procedures give a slight advantage to coalitions over friendly parties running separately.⁵ Pre-election coalitions function as a single party, but if no

² For a study of the SNP see ICG Balkans report N° 92, *Montenegro's Socialist Peoples Party: A Loyal Opposition*, 28 April 2000.

³ The SNP's Predrag Bulatovic appeared to talk down expectations to this level by saying that any improvement on 1998's result would be a basis for calling for an early general election – *Vijesti* 20 May 2000. The SNP's own paper *Dan*, reporting the same press conference, did not mention this.

⁴ All local media, 9 May 2000, quoting Beta news agency.

⁵ The electoral system stipulates that each party or coalition of parties presents a list of candidates for election, usually as many candidates as there are seats available on the municipal council. Each voter casts a single vote for the list of his choice. Any list which fails to attract at least 3 per cent of votes is eliminated. The remaining votes are subjected to the d'Hondt system: votes for each list are entered on a spreadsheet and divided by 1,2,3...etc. For x seats available the x highest totals so produced win seats.

one list wins enough seats to govern outright there can be post-election coalitions or alliances. Whoever can command most votes in the municipal council becomes mayor, usually but not necessarily the head of the list which received most votes. The head of the party list carries an important responsibility as, in effect, the leader and public face of that party's campaign. But, as in other list systems, the head of the winning list is not obliged to become mayor; having won the election he can hand over the responsibility to a colleague. Thus the election campaign does not automatically determine who will become mayor, but it does determine the balance of forces in the municipal council, which in turn elects the mayor.

II. PODGORICA

The republican capital Podgorica had a population of 152,025 in 1991, some 24.7 per cent of the total. In 1998 there were 118,603 registered voters; for the forthcoming election 111,606⁶ – the city has not shrunk, but the new laws on voters lists have led to the removal of many ostensible voters unable to produce documents proving their entitlement to vote. In 1998 the turn-out was 73 per cent, and over 86 per cent of those who voted chose either the DZB coalition or the SNP. The result was close enough to leave the LSCG with the balance of power, but left no room for marginal parties:

	Votes	Per Cent	Seats
DZB	40118	46.33	27
SNP	34866	40.26	23
LSCG	6454	7.54	4
SNS	1789	2.07	
DUA	1604	1.85	
SRS	791	0.91	
SKJ/KCG	620	0.72	
ZS	240	0.28	

The DZB thus needed LSCG co-operation in order to function as a local government, though the combined opposition could not outvote it.

Following the Liberal withdrawal of co-operation and subsequent stalemate, since February this year Podgorica has been governed by a three-man board appointed by the government, one from each coalition member, replacing the elected mayor Mihailo Buric. The head of this board, Dr Miomir Mugosa, Minister of Health in the DZB government and a popular Podgorica politician, has since been named as the DZB candidate for mayor, and will be first on the DZB list. The SNP showed how seriously it is taking the elections by placing at the head of its coalition list Predrag Bulatovic, one of three party vice-presidents and easily their most popular public figure. The LSCG is fielding its party president Miroslav Vickovic.

⁶ On 16 May, when lists closed – but appeals are possible until 31 May.

There is a significant settlement of Albanians at Tuzi, enough to determine the outcome of several seats. Altogether Albanians make up around 8 per cent of the population of Podgorica.⁷ There used to exist a separate municipality of Tuzi but it was extinguished in 1957. The main Albanian nationalist parties, DUA and DS, are in coalition ("Zajedno za Malesiju" – "Together for Malesija" – that is, the Tuzi area) calling for the restoration of municipality status, which would give them another local authority to run in addition to Ulcinj – the DUA leader, Ferhat Dinosh, is a Tuzi man. The DZB resists the idea, not least because the balance of forces in Podgorica is so close, and many Albanian voters in 1998 supported the DZB rather than their own nationalist parties. If the Albanians vote for the DUA/DS coalition this time it will certainly be harmful to the DZB vote, although the Albanians would be much more likely to support DZB than SNP in a post-election coalition: if they are lucky enough to hold the balance of power they will seek to make municipality status for Tuzi the price of their support.

III. HERCEG-NOVI

Herceg-Novi is a coastal town on the border with Croatia: it is the centre of a municipality which includes several small tourist resorts and a shipbuilding and repair yard at Bijela. Its 1991 resident population of 27,593 was 4.5 per cent of the population of Montenegro, but it has grown from an influx of refugees during the last decade. In 1998 there were 21,465 registered voters; now there are 22,018.⁸ Its economy is heavily dependent on summer tourism and so has suffered, along with the rest of the Montenegrin coast, from international isolation and perceptions of insecurity which deter tourists. As a result facilities have fallen behind the standards which modern tourists expect, so that new investment will be needed before the market can revive. A few kilometres across the border in the Dubrovnik area tourism is picking up rapidly, with tour operators flying in groups from all over Europe. Herceg-Novi meanwhile does what it can with the domestic market. The area gets much of its water supply from neighbouring Croatia, and there are chronic problems of paying for it: supply was rationed by daily cuts during April and again in the second half of May, though this time because a supply tunnel was closed for annual maintenance.

The municipality also contains the Dr Simo Milosevic Institute, a specialist hospital which used to attract patients regularly from abroad. The Institute became a national issue after it was part-sold in privatisation to the ICN company of Milan Panic, a Yugoslav-American businessman actively involved in Serbian politics in support of the democratic opposition. It was sold in early 1998 by direct deal rather than international tender, which the opposition SNP and LSCG contend contravened the law. They also say the sale was well under market price. This was the subject of a debate in parliament in February 2000, and the SNP has since launched a court case accusing the government of criminal handling – this court case is opportunely timed for the election campaign.

⁷ Statisticki Godisnjak 1999.

⁸ See footnote 6.

Such a place, whose future depends on opening up to the outside world, looks like natural territory for the Djukanovic government. But in fact the voters of Herceg-Novi in 1998 spread themselves very widely and produced the closest result in any of Montenegro's 21 municipalities. Turn-out was 72 per cent:⁹

	Votes	Per Cent	Seats
DZB	5953	38.19 (without SDP)	15
SNP	5050	31.67	13
LSCG	1157	7.42	3
SRS	1044	6.70	2
SNS	916	5.81	2
ZOKZ	377	2.41	
Independent	311	1.99	
SDP	309	1.98	
SKJ/KCG	275	1.76	
Savings	197	1.26	

This gave the resulting alliance between DZB and LSCG a bare 18-17 majority until the Liberals broke the alliance – unlike in Podgorica, the DZB needed active support from the LSCG to avoid being outvoted by the opposition. In terms of the coalitions in 2000 the voting blocks are: DZB 5953 (excluding SDP), pro-Milosevic Yugoslavia bloc 7010; so the SNP alliance has a real chance at least to gain the largest number of votes and seats – winning power is harder since the Liberals will ally with the DZB if necessary to keep them out, but even then the 1998 numbers argue a close result. Of course with such a tiny number of voters, interpretation of results becomes hazardous and extrapolation risky. And 1998 was a turbulent time. But if there is, as the SNP claim but published polls contradict, even a slight drift in support towards the Yugoslavia bloc, it should be enough to give them Herceg-Novi outright.

Nowhere else along the coast did the SNP do nearly as well last time. One reason for the strong performance of the SNP in Herceg-Novi is suggested also by the significant minority vote for the Serb nationalist parties SNS and SRS.¹⁰ Herceg-Novi is home to a sizeable group of Serbs and Montenegrin-Serbs displaced from Bosnia and Croatia in 1991-2. These resettled populations tend to be embittered by their experiences and so are natural supporters for the nationalist message. Not all of them have a vote, but their numbers are swelled by Serbian pensioners and army veterans who settled voluntarily in the area - Herceg-Novi was anyway a traditional destination for Serb migrants from Hercegovina. Even in 1991 31 per cent of the population identified themselves as Serbs, much higher than in any other municipality in Montenegro. Impoverished

⁹ The figures given here are from the electoral commission in Herceg-Novi. The official Montenegro yearbook (Statisticki godisnjak) has slightly different figures both for both votes and the number of seats: these appear to be an error.

¹⁰ Nowhere else in 1998 did these parties gain as many as four seats between them. They managed three in three small rural locales in the north.

pensioners nostalgic for better days in the old Yugoslavia are a natural constituency for the SNP.

The category "Yugoslav" in the 1991 census too accounted for 5243 citizens of Herceg-Novi, much more than in any other municipality – in terms of the current debate this is misleading, since at the time this designation usually denoted moderate citizens either of mixed parentage or unwilling to identify with a particular ethnic group. The term has since fallen into disuse, though these people will tend not to vote for nationalist parties now.

Recipes for reviving the tourist industry divide along traditional lines. The government version is that a policy of openness will in due course attract investors and tourists and secure a long-term future. The SNP version is that government policies have alienated even the Serbian tourists who used to come, as well as cut off the shipyard from federal help and pushed up prices. The remedy, as usual, is to return to better relations with Serbia, to preserve such tourism as is possible under current conditions. The SNP policy has the advantage that it could bring results quickly, but the tourist industry remembers the free-spending Germans and Britons of the past, and knows that the SNP cannot bring them back.

The DZB candidate for mayor in Herceg-Novi is Bozidar Maric, a doctor, though the head of their list is Stanko Zlokovic, head of the boat yard at Bijela. Zlokovic has a higher public profile and was considered a more likely vote-winner, but he does not want the full-time job of mayor. The incumbent mayor, Dragan Jankovic, will not stand again after four years in the post. The Yugoslavia coalition are putting up local SNP party leader Djuro Cetkovic. The LSCG candidate is new local party leader Budimir Katuric, while the SDP list is headed by veteran Miodrag Marovic, a retired Serbian journalist and publisher.

IV. PARTIES AND COALITIONS

In Podgorica the DZB will fight as a coalition just as it did in 1998. At first the coalition was to be called "For Podgorica" but the name was later changed to the old formula: "For a Better Life – Milo Djukanovic". But this does not mean that all is harmonious within the government. On at least two recent occasions, over the privatisation of the hotel "Mogren" in Budva, and over Easter greetings to the Montenegro Orthodox Church (see section V(b) below), there has been a difference of approach between its two most powerful leaders, President Djukanovic and the Speaker of the Assembly Svetozar Marovic. Why Marovic should be seeking to mark out for himself a separate political space is a subject of much speculation in political circles, but two facts about him are possibly relevant: consistently in opinion polls he is rated the most popular politician in Montenegro (his position as Speaker allows him to appear conciliatory without taking responsibility for unpopular decisions); and he is the one top politician in Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) towards whom the SNP feel reasonably friendly. In particular the personal relationship between Marovic and

the SNP's Predrag Bulatovic is co-operative.¹¹ Remembering that DPS and SNP leaders were until 1997 colleagues in a common DPS, speculation abounds, based on no evidence but mainly historical and personal background, that the tectonic plates of Montenegro's political alignments have not yet settled durably.

Among the DPS's coalition partners the People's Party (NS) seem quite solid, though whether it has yet picked up any support after a change of leadership and a political relaunch is dubious.¹² The Social Democratic Party (SDP) is playing Hamlet as usual. While reconfirming the party's presence in the coalition in Podgorica, leader Zarko Rakcevic proclaimed that he considered the Platform Proposal¹³ dead, in explicit contradiction of the official government position. In Herceg-Novi, also as in 1998, dislike between DPS and SDP runs deep and the SDP has chosen to campaign separately, leaving the DPS and NS to fight alone.¹⁴ Given the SDP's miserable solo vote in the town in 1998, this behaviour on their part appears quixotic. However, the local party attributes its poor result last time to a lack of preparation (it left the DZB at a late stage in the campaign), and says it is are confident of winning one or two seats this time.¹⁵ Other local parties are prepared to admit that the SDP are better organised than in 1998, and ought to perform to around their national level of support (7-10 per cent).

The SNP is in coalition with several parties whose Serb nationalist identity is more extreme than their own: with Vojislav Seselj's Serbian Radical Party (SRS), with Mira Markovic's Yugoslav United Left (JUL) and with the indigenous Serb People's Party (SNS).¹⁶ Three other very small communist or nationalist parties have also joined.¹⁷ In 1998 terms at first sight this looks like a better idea in Herceg-Novi, where the SNS and SRS mustered 13 per cent between them, than in Podgorica, where their combined vote was 3 per cent – but in fact if those few votes had gone to the SNP it would have gained one more seat at the expense of the DZB: as it was the SNS and SRS votes produced no seats and so were effectively wasted.

The coalition will have a different name in the two places. In Herceg-Novi it is simply "Yugoslavia Coalition – Momir Bulatovic". In Podgorica it is "Yugoslavia Coalition – Momir Bulatovic (Predrag Bulatovic)". This ungainly title can be seen as a straightforward attempt to capitalise on the popularity, or at least general acceptability, of Predrag Bulatovic as a mayoral candidate. Less charitably it can also be taken as an assertion that Predrag Bulatovic is tied into the Momir

¹¹ Notwithstanding a public row between the SNP and Marovic when the latter dissolved parliament early on 17 May for the election period.

¹² Former leader Novak Kilibarda, replaced by Dragan Soc in March, has now left the party amid some bitterness. His personal support, small though it is, will probably have left with him.

¹³ The Montenegro government's August 1999 proposal to restructure the constitutional relationship with Serbia.

¹⁴ Zarko Rakcevic's line on Herceg-Novi is, paraphrasing: "We didn't cause the mess so we won't share responsibility for it" – *Vijesti*, 22 May 2000.

¹⁵ In neighbouring Tivat, where they also stood alone in 1998, they gained four seats.

¹⁶ For the detailed story of the controversy surrounding the building of this coalition see ICG Balkans report N° 92, *Montenegro's Socialist Peoples Party: A Loyal Opposition?* 21 March 2000.

¹⁷ Communists, New Communists, Left Radical Party Nikola Pasic. None of these is an indigenous Montenegro party or stood in 1998.

Bulatovic effort, to forestall any suggestion that his growing popularity is any kind of threat to the party leader. Predrag's visit to Belgrade on 19 May 2000, and pictures of him posing stiffly with Momir Bulatovic and Slobodan Milosevic in *Dan* the next day, rather feed this impression – Milosevic cannot surely believe that his open support can make the SNP any stronger.

But the coalition will complicate the interpretation of results as far as the SNP are concerned, since the profile of the coalition as a whole is more radical than that of the SNP alone. While nationalist and radical voters will be secured, marginal voters discontented with the government might not be attracted by this alternative. JUL is a particular embarrassment, since the party attracts almost no votes in Montenegro, and such a close identification with Mrs Milosevic uncomfortably raises the question of whether the "Yugoslavia block" will actually work for Montenegro or indeed only for Serbia. A good result would be unambiguous. But a bad result could be interpreted in too many ways: unattractive coalition, general loss of support for the SNP, rigging by the government. In public the SNP will certainly justify failure in terms of cheating by the DZB (from this point of view a good performance by the LSCG will be the worst outcome for them, since the DZB could not seriously be accused of cheating in favour of the LSCG). But behind the scenes the party will face a painful debate.

The LSCG too is not without problems. The rise in its support, which accompanied the prominence of the independence issue in late-1999 and early-2000, seems to have halted as political tensions have subsided a little into the spring. Not only that, but the original decision to break up the coalitions had dramatic effects on the party, particularly in Herceg-Novi where there was a bitter split resulting in the expulsion of several members including the local party leader. The rebels disagreed with the leadership's "autocratic" (their word) handling of the issue. Nationwide some of them have split off to found their own party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Although this development is irritating for the LSCG, the new LDP may have trouble finding an electorate of its own and will probably not be much of a threat to the LSCG vote, at least this time. In Herceg-Novi, where disaffected Liberals have preferred to join the SDP, it is not even standing. The LSCG is as eager as the SNP to accuse the government of rigging; after all, it is a card which cannot lose - it can either excuse defeat or make victory the greater. The Liberals tend to be perceived by non-supporters as a single-issue independence party, though they themselves are annoyed with this image and prefer to be seen rather as anti-authoritarian democrats offering a complete alternative to the "DPS/SNP Establishment".

The Albanian coalition in Podgorica is described in section II above. This coalition will not stand in Herceg-Novi, where the Albanian community is tiny. In Podgorica there is a further coalition of two small Serb nationalist parties under the title "Serb Agreement" (Srpska Sloga), who are unlikely to win seats. These are the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and Serb People's Radical Party (SNRS). The LDP and yet another Communist party – the SKJ/KCG who also stood independently in 1998 – are also standing. In Herceg-Novi a group of citizens are standing as an independent list, as in 1998.

V. ISSUES

A. Free and Fair?

As a result of a new law on voters' lists, passed by parliament in March with both SNP and DZB support, the qualification for eligibility to vote in these elections will be one year's residence in the municipality.¹⁸ The number of voters at any one polling station is limited to 1000.

While agreeing that the new law is fair, the SNP have been warning that the DZB will abuse its position of power and control over structures to manipulate the elections unfairly. As mentioned above, in this they are supported by the LSCG – these two political opposites often sound similar when attacking the government. The accusations are several: (1) that the government is capable of various electoral malpractices including addition of false voters to voting lists; (2) that government media will support the DZB (a confusion of state and party interests); (3) that the DZB will use government money in its campaign; (4) that the large police force will be used to intimidate voters.

Warnings of government malpractice arise from allegations left over from the 1998 elections, including: breach of the period of silence just before voting day, over-long opening of some polling stations, disappearance of voting boxes. None of this has much impressed the public. But voting lists have been a particular concern. The central voting list is maintained by the Secretariat for Development (razvoj) in Podgorica, while local lists are under the control of the municipal secretariats for administration (uprava), under approval of the mayor. At an early stage in the campaign on 4 April 2000 the SNP called for the elections to be postponed, on the grounds that the government had failed properly to implement the new law on voters' lists, by not publishing changes to the 1998 lists in due time. The SNP claimed to have information that, for example, there existed 1500 voters with the same ID card number. The Secretariat for Development replied that it was doing its best in the short time-frame imposed on it by the new law and indignantly denied the existence of any false voters.¹⁹ The SNP repeated on 5 May accusations that government organs were either incompetently or maliciously failing to meet deadlines and provide full information about lists.²⁰ In Herceg-Novi the local SNP has been complaining fiercely that the municipal electoral commission has decided not to open polling stations in three villages which voted heavily for SNP in 1998, the commission replying that the villages are too small (under 100 voters each) to merit their own posts. But on the whole one has the impression that the government machinery has done an honest if flawed job with the limited resources at its disposal.

The roles of state TV/radio and the government newspaper *Pobjeda* were the subject of a parliamentary debate concluding in a consensus on 27 March that state media would give equal time to all competing parties/coalitions in the

¹⁸ For other elections the criterion will be two years.

¹⁹ *Vijesti*, 5 April 2000.

²⁰ *Dan* etc, 6 May 2000. Two weeks later complete print-outs of voters' lists were being passed around at party rallies.

election campaign. Opposition parties expressed scepticism that the agreement would be honoured, while the government pointed out how open and democratic Montenegro was in comparison to Serbia, where such an agreement would be unthinkable. Montenegro TV is governed by a multi-party board; an attempt to remove the head of the station by the SNP, LSCG and (strangely) NS on 29 March failed.²¹ In general the opposition parties have no difficulty in getting their statements broadcast on government media, though undeniably as in most countries the activities of government figures receive more publicity.

In support of the claim that the government might use state funds in its campaign, the opposition has cited the busy road works and face-lifting now going on, particularly in Podgorica. Since transport is a leading local issue, the government (it is alleged) is trying to create an illusion of progress to deceive voters. The government respond that city improvements are a normal function of government, and that the timing of current works coincides with spring weather which makes them easier to carry out. Western voters would probably be surprised that so much was being made of what would seem to them normal electioneering by the party in power.

Police plots to undermine the opposition have not yet been a serious feature of the election campaign. On 24 March, when Momir Bulatovic held a rally in Herceg-Novi, graffiti slogans in favour of Milosevic appeared all over town. The SNP indignantly denied responsibility and accused the authorities of organising the graffiti to discredit the party. Nothing came of the incident, and some of the graffiti are still there, unnoticed on the walls. There was a brief controversy over the identity of a man who carried a large portrait of Slobodan Milosevic at two SNP rallies – interestingly the SNP clearly wished to dissociate itself from this man.²² Later the SNP blamed police disinformation for the prominent publicity given to a reported split in the party over the Yugoslavia coalition, but the accusations had a routine feel and were not pursued.²³ The Liberals in particular are prone to talk of pressure being brought to bear on groups of voters by police or DPS activists, but have found it hard to provide evidence.

The presence of an OSCE team of observers, as in 1998, who will be following all aspects of the electoral process including media coverage, will provide a welcome independent viewpoint on the process, minimising both the temptation for any party to corrupt the fairness of the election, and the likelihood that any attempt would go undetected. Also, just as important, the observers will reduce the scope for cries of foul to cover up any party's embarrassing defeat. It is helpful in this respect that the local OSCE office has built up good relations with the opposition parties as well as with the government.

However the OSCE presence in 1998 did not prevent complaints from the opposition. This time too both the SNP and LSCG are convinced that the elections will not be fair – that even if there is no illegal malpractice the government's control over money, media and police presents a less-than-level

²¹ *Vijesti*, 30 March 2000.

²² *Vijesti*, 28 March 2000.

²³ See footnote 16.

playing-field. The SNP has not ruled out the possibility of a boycott but have not so far floated this possibility in public – wisely since it would immediately dominate the agenda.

B. National Issues²⁴

Contentious national issues have been few so far in a quiet spring. The economy ought to be the big issue but has not taken off. It is the area where most people feel the effects of government policy most strongly, and where the government is most vulnerable during a period of shaky reforms and readjustment from dependence on supplies from Serbia. Voters however seem phlegmatic about the continuing difficulties, seeing them as a continuation of problems stretching back ten years.

Instead corruption looks like occupying most of the opposition's time. A major parliamentary debate on privatisation in April left the impression that no-one liked the government's handling of privatisation so far, and even that an air of dishonesty hung over parts of it. The SNP, backed up by the LSCG, has done all it can to spread the image of Montenegro as a corrupt state run by a corrupt government under a corrupt president but it is not working for them: voters appear cynical about their politicians, but on the whole do not believe the SNP would be any better if it was in power, and do not take the Liberals seriously as a possible government. As noted above, the SNP has launched a court case against the government over one privatisation – in Herceg-Novi.

Another arm of the SNP campaign to expose alleged government corruption involves questioning what has become of all the overseas aid supposed to have been coming into Montenegro in recent years. The SNP newspaper *Dan* has run a major series on this, supported up by statements by Predrag Bulatovic in parliament. It is true that the effects of much of the aid are not visible to the average citizen, and the government is caught between asserting that there has been plenty of aid (so showing that its policy of international engagement is successful, but remaining vulnerable to accusations of "where is it?") and between its own criticisms that donors have been slow to implement their promises (so fuelling SNP accusations that Western donors are poor friends). However it is also true that the SNP accusations try to have it both ways, saying in effect (a) the West gives no aid, only promises; (b) the government are corruptly misusing Western aid to win the local elections.²⁵

An immense fuss was created by President Djukanovic's decision to send Easter greetings to the Montenegro Orthodox Church as well as its Serbian counterpart, provoking an apoplectic response from the latter and leading pro-Yugoslavia parties to accuse him of promoting separatism – if he had not sent both greetings he would have come under equal attack from the separatists. This is a no-win

²⁴ For a general introduction to politics in Montenegro, see ICG Balkans report No. 89, *Montenegro: In the Shadow of the Volcano*, 21 March 2000. The present section deals only with issues which have played a part in this election campaign.

²⁵ Gist of exchanges in parliament between Predrag Bulatovic and Prime Minister Filip Vujanovic, 11 May 2000.

issue for Djukanovic: his government and even his own DPS party are divided on this issue but it is unlikely on its own to have influenced many voters.

The SNP and its allies are still laying immense stress on the "NATO aggression" against Yugoslavia in 1999, which leads them into passionate criticism of the United States. No one doubts that they feel very strongly about this, and that it is a rallying-point for supporters, but it is not gaining any new votes.

C. Local Issues

Individual issues are discussed above in the sections on the two municipalities. A further question is, how large a part have these local issues played in the election campaign and the minds of voters? The campaign in Herceg-Novi seems more likely to be influenced by local factors than that in Podgorica. There are a number of clear local issues, even if these are not actually soluble at local level: how to get and pay for water, what kind of tourists to try to attract, and privatisation of the Simo Milosevic Institute (section III above). In Podgorica the hottest local issues seem to be traffic and parking.

D. Personalities

In a campaign without contentious issues, personalities may make the difference. This helps the DZB because of the "Milo" factor: apart from committed SNP and LSCG supporters, the public at large has great respect for the President.²⁶ Prime Minister Vujanovic also has a good reputation, and Mugosa, the DZB candidate for mayor of Podgorica, is a popular local personality. With these strengths the DZB will be disappointed and surprised if it does not retain at least its 1998 vote, and will be hoping for outright victory at least in Podgorica.

The SNP does not have the personalities to give popular appeal to its message. It has staked everything on nominating Predrag Bulatovic for Podgorica: he is the SNP politician with the best image among uncommitted voters, and if he cannot attract new votes it is safe to say that no SNP politician could. A good result would be a personal triumph for him, but a bad result could not be blamed on him. Behind the inevitable public calls of foul play and rigging which would attend an SNP defeat, a more likely focus of discontent is the party leader Momir Bulatovic, who is already deeply unpopular with neutrals and identified with the Belgrade establishment rather than with Montenegro interests.

The Liberals face the same difficulty, that their leaders are loved within the party but not much outside. Their chances of increased support ironically ride on pro-independence sentiment, even though they are trying to run a campaign based on better and cleaner government.

²⁶ Information gathered unscientifically by ICG in numerous conversations, but borne out by published polls. *Dan* on 5 May 2000 attacked the phenomenon as a media-created personality cult, so demonstrating that the SNP recognises and worries about it too.

VI. THE BELGRADE ANGLE

Official Belgrade is also taking an interest in the election results. The natural hope of the ruling group around President Milosevic will be for an SNP victory: if the SNP is growing stronger then maybe the inconvenient Djukanovic government will fall through lack of popular support, offering the prospect of future SNP government in Montenegro, harmony between the republics at the federal level, and slightly simplifying the question of federal elections which ought to be held this year. This perhaps explains why JUL leader Mira Markovic and SRS leader Vojislav Seselj have joined forces with the SNP to help them gain victory – such “help” is not unambiguously helpful, as discussed above. Apart from this, the Serbian and federal authorities have not yet done much to interfere in the elections beyond sustaining the usual barrage of anti-Djukanovic comment in official media.²⁷ The Belgrade authorities could publicly write off defeat for the SNP as DZB manipulation of voters' lists and media. Victory for the DZB would not be welcomed in Belgrade, but there is no sign yet that it would lead to any anti-Montenegro measures in addition to those already in force.

Bad relations between the federal army (VJ) and the Montenegro government provide an uneasy background to the campaign. Rumours of VJ exercises on the eve or day of the elections have been first asserted then denied, and VJ generals and Djukanovic continue to issue hostile statements – on Djukanovic's side this may be partly from a calculation that keeping alive fear of the VJ may keep wavering voters with the DZB. Meanwhile off-duty soldiers in uniform sit peacefully unarmed in street cafes, looking as if deliberately unthreatening.

VII. CONCLUSION

Local elections in mid-term are often seen as an opportunity for voters to punish the government for the problems of life in general, and the results are not taken too seriously. That will not be the case in these two elections, where all parties accept that the result is of crucial importance for the immediate future of the whole of Montenegro. Whatever the results of these two campaigns, interpretation will be complicated by familiar problems:

- Have the voters passed a verdict on the general performance of the government, or only on local issues and personalities? If the same trend result is observed in both elections this question will be easier to answer. The fact that Podgorica is at stake is relevant here, for the two municipalities together account for around 30 per cent of Montenegrin voters. But the elections remain local elections, and not formally a plebiscite upon the policies of the Montenegrin government.

²⁷ As this report was going to press, news emerged that the Serbian trade blockade against Montenegro was being relaxed after Predrag Bulatovic's visit to Belgrade (*Vijesti* 22 May 2000). It is too soon to assess the meaning or truth of this news – *Vijesti* quotes trade minister Ramo Bralic as saying “I've no idea what's going on”. But if true it can only be helpful – and intended to be helpful – to Bulatovic.

- Do the voters really care about the result – that is, are they taking the elections as seriously as the politicians and outside observers? Local elections are traditionally cursed with boredom from voters, and if many stay away then victory will simply go to the party best able to motivate its committed support. The size of the turn-out will be important in judging the meaning of the results. After such a pervasive campaign, anything under around 60 per cent would be a victory for apathy.
- How can the SNP vote be analysed? Has the “Momir Bulatovic” coalition helped or harmed it, or merely resulted in a neutral agglomeration of the votes which would naturally have gone to the coalition partners anyway?

Nonetheless the results will be eagerly scrutinised at home and abroad for signs about which way public opinion in Montenegro is tending. For this reason it can fairly be said that these elections are much more important to the professional politicians than to the people. In the absence of any other indications except contested opinion polls, these two elections will be the only formal commentary upon two years of DZB government in Montenegro. They will be a very imperfect commentary, but will nevertheless become a basis of political debate for the rest of the year. It is thus useful to speculate on the consequences of various possible outcomes:

The government needs as a minimum to retain its 1998 level of support. Defeat in Herceg-Novi would be bad but could be survived; defeat in Podgorica would be much tougher to explain away. It could try to attribute a bad performance to local factors, but it would be damaged, vulnerable to accusations from the opposition that it clings to power without popular support. Early general elections would enter the political debate: such an appeal would be resisted by the DZB majority in parliament, but even within the coalition (never a completely happy family) tensions could rise. On the other hand a good performance – better than the 1998 result, with either election won outright – would keep the government on track and strengthen the ruling coalition.

The SNP needs to win one election, preferably both. A narrow defeat in Podgorica would be honourable but even that would require an increase in the support given in 1998 to the combined opposition coalition partners. They will attribute any bad result to government manipulation of voters' lists and media but internally could enter a period of severe crisis: were the coalitions harmful, or is the SNP generally losing support? Even the leadership of Momir Bulatovic could come into question. But a good performance would give heart to the whole party and provide a platform for a call for general elections and a sustained attack upon the government's record.

The Liberals want to use the elections to prove they are a serious force growing in strength. Independence is not the main campaigning issue this time but its cause will be advanced if the LSCG does well. Their minimum objective is to continue to hold the balance of power in both places, but if they fail to increase their votes and seats they must regard their campaign as a failure. They can blame a bad result on government rigging, whether there is any or not, or the split within the Liberal family, and claim it does not affect the strength of the

independence movement. But a good result for them will have its effect on the SDP too (remembering that the SDP is running alone in Herceg-Novi), and thus may influence the governing coalition a little more towards calling the referendum so long discussed.

Two elections for local authorities are a fragile base for such sweeping claims by any party. But these elections have dominated the political agenda in the spring of 2000, and have taken on a significance out of proportion to the importance of the powers at stake, almost as though a mock general election were in fact taking place. For better or for worse, these elections will set the tone of political debate in Montenegro for the rest of the year.

VIII. PREDICTION

In 1997-1999 there was a trend of increasing support for the anti-isolation and pro-Western agenda of the DPS under president Djukanovic. The 1998 election established clearly that Djukanovic had successfully carried the electorate with him away from Momir Bulatovic, so that since then Djukanovic has represented the Establishment, meaning the perceived natural government. This is a powerful built-in advantage, and an outside observer has no evidence that that support is waning. On the contrary, the SNP's pro-Yugoslavia message suffers a new blow with every assassination in Belgrade, every new move by Milosevic to strengthen his hold on power. The Liberal recovery after their disaster in the 1998 elections seems to have stabilised for now. Polls indicate that few voters are moving between the three main party blocks, so the campaign is for a relatively small number of uncommitted or apathetic voters.

In Podgorica the government does not need many extra votes to win the municipality. It has the momentum to achieve this, but the Albanian vote may go nationalist, and it may be a close thing whether the Liberals still hold the balance of power.

In Herceg-Novi a more volatile (because smaller) electorate is harder to call. The SNP has a solid block of support but is not attracting new voters. No-one knows how the nationalist vote (SNP allies) is holding up but the NATO bombings of 1999 do not seem to have strengthened it. Younger voters, to judge from turnout at public meetings, favour the DZB/SDP and LSCG. The result could be a win for no-one: neither government nor SNP coalition clearly dominant, with the Liberals (and SDP) holding the balance with representation which has increased, but not by as much as they hoped.

Podgorica/Washington/Brussels, 26 May 2000

GLOSSARY OF POLITICAL PARTY ACRONYMS AND ALIGNMENTS

Government bloc:

DZB	"Da Zivimo Bolje" (For a Better Life) – Montenegro's governing coalition, comprising:
DPS	Democratic Party of Socialists (under President Milo Djukanovic)
SDP	Social Democratic Party (Zarko Rakcevic)
NS	People's Party (Dragan Soc)

Pro-Yugoslavia bloc ("Yugoslavia – Momir Bulatovic" coalition):

SNP	Socialist People's Party (Momir Bulatovic)
JUL	Yugoslav United Left (Mira Markovic, wife of Slobodan Milosevic)
SRS	Serb Radical Party (Vojislav Seselj)
SNS	Serb People's Party (Zelidrag Nikcevic)
KPJ	Communist Party of Yugoslavia
NKPJ	New Communist Party of Yugoslavia
RSL NP	Left Radical Party – Nikola Pasic

Pro-independence (but mutually hostile):

LSCG	Liberal Alliance (Miodrag Zivkovic)
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party (Bozidar Nikolic)

Albanians in coalition "Zajedno za Malesiju" in Podgorica only:

DUA	Democratic Union of Albanians (Ferhat Dinosha)
DS	Democratic Alliance (Mehmet Bardhi)

Minor Serb parties: (Srpska Sloga)

SDS	Serb Democratic Party
SNRS	Serb People's Radical Party

Independent Communist:

SKJ/KCG	Yugoslav Communist Alliance/Montenegro Communists
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