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General Election in Montenegro: A step closer to Euro-Atlantic integration?

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Introduction

Montenegro has yet again drawn the attention of the European public during the general election on 16 October. On election day many irregularities were recorded and several incidents occurred, including an alleged coup attempt, as the big question loomed over the country: Is Montenegro still going to be ruled by the same man, the incumbent Prime Minister Milo Đukanović who has been in power for over a quarter of a century, as president and Prime Minister during four terms, with just two short periods of 'retirement' when he actually pulled strings behind people loyal to him? Montenegrin opposition was quite adamant in their demand that Đukanović has to leave the political scene of Montenegro after twenty-five years of almost undisputed rule. The four major opposition parties in Montenegro, the Democratic Front (DF – Demokratski Front), the Key Coalition (Ključ),

the Democratic Montenegro (DCG – Demokratska Crna Gora) and the Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (SDP – Socijaldemokratska Partija Crne Gore), have all decided that they would not make coalition agreements with the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS – Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore) presided over by Milo Đukanović and help him by any means to form a government. The DPS managed to win 41% of the votes on 16 October and consequently 36 seats in the 81 seat Parliament, and they needed five more mandates to form the government. At its first session after the election Montenegro's Parliament was inaugurated on 7 November, just days after Milo Đukanović unexpectedly stepped down as the DPS's candidate for the new Prime Minister, leaving the place to Duško Marković, the party's Vice President and Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro. Montenegro is expected to join NATO next year as the ratification process should end by

spring 2017, and the country has so far opened 24 chapters in negotiations to access the European Union, but it is still not clear whether this process would be tempered by the current unstable political situation.

Montenegro's path to independence

Montenegro's position in the Balkans is many ways quite unique. After the breakup of Yugoslavia most of the republics that turned independent were embroiled in bloody wars, especially Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Montenegro involved in a short but infamous siege and shelling of Dubrovnik and southern Croatia. In 1999 NATO decided to bombard Serbia after the breakout of conflict between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, and Montenegro was once again spared the destruction of war. Even though Montenegro sided with Milošević in his warmongering in 1991, Milo Đukanović decided to deviate from the politics of the Belgrade central government and to start building his strong connections in the West, which eventually allowed Montenegro, then still part of Yugoslavia, to be excluded from being targeted by NATO bombs. Just a year after the war in Kosovo, Milošević was toppled in Serbia in 2000 and Montenegro was given an opportunity to continue its lengthy path to independence. Montenegro was quite successful in breaking away from Serbia's grip due to Đukanović's leadership and success in gaining control over the State Security Service. Serbian control over Montenegro had loosened further after 2000 and after reforms of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The country was in 2003 named the State Union of

Serbia and Montenegro. This Union was finally dissolved in 2006 after the referendum in Montenegro and its subsequent independence.

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This was a major success for a country that was dominated by foreign powers for centuries. The success was even bigger considering the fact that around a third of Montenegro's population consider themselves Serbs, and less than 50% consider themselves Montenegrins. Milo Đukanović led Montenegro as Prime Minister at the time of independence and he was successful largely because he was willing to protect the rights of ethnic Bosniaks and Albanians, predominantly Muslims, who comprise around 20% of Montenegro's population. Winning the support of minorities was crucial for Montenegro's independence and it brought sympathy of the West for Milo Đukanović, who crossed the long path from Milošević's closest ally to a harbinger of Montenegro's independence in fifteen years. Soon Montenegro decided to firmly set its ambitions on joining Euro-Atlantic integrations.

Developments in Montenegro as an independent state

Just a year after the 2006 referendum Montenegro signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, and the country has also set joining NATO and the EU as its national priorities. Unlike its northern neighbor Serbia, which for obvious reasons has no plans to join NATO and balances its ambitions between Europe and Russia, Montenegro took quite a resolute step on the Euro-Atlantic route and soon became the frontrunner to join NATO and the EU among the countries of the Western Balkans, excluding Croatia which had opened EU negotiations even before Montenegro gained independence. It seemed that Montenegro could become a role model for the rest of the region and the 'Monte Carlo of the Balkans.' Montenegro as an independent state started denying its links with Serbia and its dark past in early nineties, and promoted itself as a country devoted to European values and an attractive tourist destination, ideal for foreign direct investment, especially in tourism. Notwithstanding the credits won for independence, in the years following the referendum many in the country believed that it was time for Đukanović to step down. Đukanović proved himself as an apt leader with his party (DPS) continuously winning elections and his ability to forge alliances with other Montenegrin leaders. Still the pressure was so high that Đukanović was forced to resign twice, in 2006 and 2010. Nevertheless, Đukanović was in both cases able to gain back power as he had stable support at home and mostly unwavering support of the EU and the United States as he was willing to concede to all demands from Brussels and Washington.

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For that reason, both the EU and the US turned a blind eye to the internal situation marred by high level of corruption, organized crime and persecution of the civil society and media. The annual reports of the European Commission and most prominent international NGOs advocating transparency and human rights have been continuously warning of the country's high level of corruption. Montenegro soon became infamous for corruption and organized crime, including cigarette smuggling of gigantic proportions and notorious drug and human trafficking. The opposition was also accusing the ruling DPS of hiring people in all levels of state administration in return for their unswerving loyalty, for embezzlement and for protecting private interest in public projects. The most notorious case is that of the former President of Serbia and Montenegro and once close ally of Milo Đukanović, Svetozar Marović who was arrested in 2015 for charges of corruption. With the growing corruption scandals involving many members of Montenegro's political elite, the opposition to Milo Đukanović was mounting and escalated into violent protest on the streets of Podgorica in October 2015 which were quelled by an excessive use of police force.

Opposition to DPS and the general election on October 16

Ahead of the election on October 16, the opposition in Montenegro was more determined than ever to put a full stop to Đukanović's rule. The opposition was formed around four major parties and alliances or party platforms that all claimed they want a new era in Montenegro and with a mission to oust Đukanović after decades of his rule, no matter the cost. The biggest challenger to the ruling DPS was DF, which launched a huge, quite aggressive and abundantly funded campaign. DPS has been accusing the DF of having millions of euros in funding from Russian sources. The DF has decisively dismissed this allegations, claiming their pro-Western orientation, and accused in return DPS and Prime Minister Đukanović of allowing Russian capital to sprawl around the country on an unprecedented scale. Coalition Ključ is another interesting party or a rather wide platform of various parties, some pro-Serbian and pro-Russian, and some pro-European, but with a common driving force to oust Đukanović.

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DCG was founded just months before the general election, when they split from the Socialist People's Party. The leader of the fourth big opposition party is Ranko Krivokapić, whose SDP in a member of the Alliance of

Socialists and Democrats on the European level, and the SDP have an undisputed pro-European vision of Montenegro. Election day in Montenegro was one with extraordinary occurrences which were not recorded in other European countries in recent history, showing the fragility of Montenegro's young democracy.

First of all, the electoral law of Montenegro implied the introduction of biometric identification cards, which were not introduced by the date of the election, thus contributing to the overall mess with the electoral register, which had many irregularities, including numerous names of the deceased. Numerous irregularities also occurred all around Montenegro, including the sudden influx of thousands of Montenegrin nationals whose travel and voting was allegedly paid for, with some of them registered as Montenegrin citizens just days ahead of the election. There were many unusual phenomena, such as the fact that the Croat minority political party HGI (Croatian Civic Initiative) won votes in many municipalities in Northern Montenegro where there are no Croats in the electoral registry. The biggest incident was the alleged coup which was to be carried out by an armed terrorist group imported from Serbia.

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Those alleged to be involved were arrested by Montenegro's police before the polling stations were closed. The ruling DPS claimed that the alleged coup was targeting Đukanović himself, who was to be abducted by the terrorists and warned that if the terrorists had not been stopped, they would have crippled Montenegro's ambitions to join NATO in 2017. Claiming that the government's top officials were under threat, the government issued orders to ban the use of social media and instant messages services like whatsapp and viber, which were widely used to motivate voters to get out of their homes and vote. On the other hand, the opposition claimed that the alleged coup was not genuine and that it was rather a scenario conducted by the DPS to disrupt the elections in favor of Đukanović and the DPS. The opposition also called upon the authorities to examine the case of the alleged coup and also asked for the results of the election to be annulled until it had been established who was behind the terrorist group and what were their real intentions. At the end of the eventful election day Đukanović and DPS managed to win 36 seats in the Parliament, three seats less than in the previous election in 2012, leaving them with a gap of five seats needed to have the majority to form the government.

Developments after the general election

A month after the election, by mid-November, it was still not clear who would be the Prime Minister or what the government would look like, as the Parliament was inaugurated with a thin quorum at the first session on November 7. At that moment Milo Đukanović had already withdrawn his candidacy for Prime Minister, and the DPS appointed Duško Marković, who was

serving as Deputy Prime Minister and Vice President of the DPS. Duško Marković was not present at the first session of the Parliament and it seemed that his ambitions are not in line with his party boss Đukanović. Marković was head of the intelligence agency of Montenegro for years and his political experience and skills are extensive, and evidently he is capable of taking the helm of the country, while his pro-Western orientation is also undisputed.

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By mid-November it was still not clear who would form the government, as the opposition was also luring the minority parties into their camp, and both they and the DPS needed their seats to get into power. After long negotiations, the minority parties finally decided to side with the DPS, and Duško Marković was sworn in as new Prime Minister of Montenegro on 28 November. The key interest of the international community is the future orientation of Montenegro's foreign policy, and as the country is pretty divided between its pro-Russian and pro-European and NATO ambitions, this election has drawn a lot of interest of major global players, including the EU and its key member states, as well as the US and the Russian Federation. So far Milo Đukanović has always claimed that he was the one who led Montenegro to independence and put it on track of Euro-Atlantic integration. Indeed, Montenegro was granted the status of candidate for EU in 2010, and the country

entered negotiations with the European block in 2012, with 24 chapters opened by fall of 2016. Following this, Montenegro received an invitation to join NATO in December 2015, and it is expected that the ratification process will be concluded by spring 2017, upon which Montenegro is bound to join the North Atlantic alliance. It seems that the strongest NATO member state, the US, is quite keen to see Montenegro within NATO ranks and on a fast track, and thus block the Russian attempt to have a strategic stronghold in the Mediterranean, especially with the Russians stepping up their efforts in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, in Syria.

With Donald Trump elected president of the United States, the relations between NATO and Montenegro will not see any dramatic change. By November this year 14 out of 28 NATO member states had already ratified the Accession protocol.

For that reason, the EU and NATO were willing to cope with Đukanović's rule regardless of numerous reports of a high level of corruption and organized crime in the country, as Montenegro has a vital strategic importance especially for NATO. On the other hand, the opposition is constantly claiming that Đukanović's Western orientation is just a façade which allows him to conduct business as usual, allowing him to run the country as his own feud. Đukanović's opponents claim that it was Đukanović himself who opened the door wide to Russian investments in Montenegro, allowing them to purchase vast swaths of the

best land parcels on the Montenegrin coast and to invest millions in the Montenegrin economy. The Russian tycoon, Oleg Deripaska, collected millions of euros in Montenegrin taxpayers' money as he decided to cash in a sovereign guarantee issued during the privatization of the aluminum smelter near Podgorica.

The opposition also claims that Milo Đukanović is basically an opportunist who does not care about values but only about his personal interest and those loyal to him, while using the Euro-Atlantic integration and business ties with the Russians alternatively as tools that allow him to stay in power and control the country's economic resources. With Donald Trump elected president of the United States, the relations between NATO and Montenegro will not see any dramatic change. By November this year 14 out of 28 NATO member states had already ratified the Accession protocol and NATO officials have stated clearly that the process of ratification should be completed by spring 2017, thus concluding the process of Montenegro's entry into the Alliance. Even though it is likely that the US under Trump's leadership will seek to ameliorate relations with Russia, which has fallen since the annexation of Crimea to its lowest point since the end of the Cold War, this will not have an impact on Montenegro's membership in NATO. It is also plausible that the new president will revise his ideas on NATO's future in regards to the statements made during the presidential campaign, and preserve the strength of this, the biggest military and political alliance in the world. Russia will on the other hand try to preserve its economic and to a certain extent political influence in Montenegro, and focus instead on the areas foremost in its geostrategic interests, including ex-Soviet republics and the Middle East.

Conclusion

Montenegro has been an independent nation for just over a decade, but the country has not seen a full democratic transition as have other countries in Eastern Europe, and the consequences are still felt today. The democratic order in this country is still quite fragile, as experienced yet again in the last general election held in October this year. The credit for the independence which was won without bloodshed is largely given to Milo Đukanović, but after more than 25 years in power in various forms, it seems that the tide of change is rising. The Euro-Atlantic future of the country is doubtless secured, especially with the new Prime Minister Duško Marković who is quite resolute to lead the county to NATO and

EU membership. The mechanism for the ratification of membership protocol between NATO and Montenegro is expected to be over in just months, and major NATO powers are keen to see Montenegro soon as its partner due to global dissent with Russia. The chances of other countries in the region joining the North Atlantic club any time soon are bleak. Montenegro has also advanced farther on the EU accession path than its neighbors, and stands a good chance to join the EU far ahead of Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia. On the other hand the reforms made so far in Montenegro have only been of a cosmetic nature, and great efforts are needed to start eradicating the omni-present corruption and highly organized criminal syndicates.

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