



Montenegro after the General Elections: A New Chapter in Transition or Preservation of Status Quo?

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Introduction

The general elections held in Montenegro on 30 August 2020 has once again drawn the attention of the Western Balkans to the smallest, measured by population, among seven nations that emerged after the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This attention is due to a number of factors. Back in May of 2018 Montenegro has opened the last of the thirty-three chapters in the negotiation process

with the European Union, making it a harbinger among Western Balkans nations on the path to Euro-Atlantic integrations, especially as the country had joined the North Atlantic Alliance in June 2017. Other countries in the region linger behind Montenegro – Albania and North Macedonia, both NATO members, are still waiting for the opening of the negotiations with the EU. Serbia has no intention to join NATO, and in spite of EU negotiations and ambitions, sees itself in balance between the West on one

side, and Russia and China on the other. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are far from NATO membership and have merely the status of potential candidates for EU membership. This is why all eyes of the region and of the advocates of continuation of EU enlargement policy are on Montenegro. The second factor are strong historical ties of this country on the Adriatic coast with its northern neighbor Serbia. Serbian minority makes up to one third of Montenegro's population, and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC- *Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva*) plays a vital role in Montenegrin society, as this country does not have its own autocephalous Church recognized by other Orthodox Churches in Eastern Christendom. This gives Serbia and the SPC a significant clout within borders of its southern neighbor. The third factor is the involvement of global players in this country. The United States has advocated strongly to include Montenegro in NATO in order to stretch the line of NATO's southern flank in the Northern Mediterranean from the Iberian Peninsula to the west to Greece and Turkey in the east. On the other hand, Montenegro's authorities accused Russia of meddling in the general elections held in October 2016 when the alleged coup d'état occurred on the election day. Many feared a similar scenario on the eve of 30 August 2020 election, fathoming the outbreak of riots and violence that could ignite the powder keg in the Balkans. Although none of these happened, Montenegro is not ceasing to be the subject of

the geopolitical chessboard. Considering these factors, the attention of neighbors to the events in this Balkan country is understandable. The unfolding situation after the elections in which the government of Montenegro is backed by a very thin majority in the Parliament (*Skupština Crne Gore*) and with no clear vision nor strategy for further political and economic development of the country, is only fueling the wariness of its neighbors and of Brussels about Montenegro as a success story.

Thorny transition in Montenegro

Until the 30 August general election Montenegro was ruled in continuum by the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS - *Demokratska partija socijalista Crne Gore*), a party formed as a legal successor of the Communists Party of Montenegro. For this reason many point out that Montenegro was ruled for 75 years by the same communist or reformed-communist political elite and that the country went only through a superficial, formal transition, while the old structures from the communist past remained to be in power only camouflaged under the new pro-Western and pro-EU image of the DPS. Furthermore, the president of the DPS Milo Đukanović is the president of Montenegro to the present day. Đukanović was elected as president in 2018, now serving his second presidential term, and since 1991 he also served four terms as

prime minister of Montenegro. For this reason, the sluggish transition in Montenegro was for many embodied in the very political figure of Milo Đukanović.

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Đukanović's political longevity and talent are non-disputable, however it is his adamant persistence to embody the highest political power in Montenegro that has enticed very different political parties in Montenegro in joining forces before and during the 30 August elections - in order to topple the rule of Đukanović and the DPS. On the other hand, Đukanović's determination to lead Montenegro to its independence in the 2006 referendum and the Euro-Atlantic integration is beyond dispute. However, his critics claim that these ambitions were purely pragmatic and not an expression of genuine beliefs, as Đukanović's was the closest ally of Slobodan Milošević until 1997. And in spite of Montenegro's success to be the champion of EU integration among six countries of the Western Balkans, this progress is marred by many failures. The country is regularly criticized by the European Commission due to its frail efforts to tackle nepotism, omnipresent corruption and to

curb organized crime. Powerful drug cartels based in Montenegro's Bay of Kotor can trace their origins to the cigarette trafficking in the nineties when Montenegro and Serbia formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Pressed by a considerable and influential Serbian minority in the country, the DPS ruled by Milo Đukanović was always forced to create the adequate balance of power in running the country. Well-known and traditional Montenegrin opportunism also took its toll. Regardless of the country's proclaimed pro-Western orientation, Montenegro continued to nourish its strong and historical links with Russia.

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This was made evident in 2011 when the DPS and Putin's United Russia party signed an agreement on cooperation. Furthermore, Russian capital has sprawled around the country, Russian tycoon Oleg Deripaska was involved in the privatization of the aluminum smelter near the capital Podgorica and many Russian nationals settled in the country. For all these reasons Montenegro has fallen short in its attempts to become "Monte Carlo of the Balkans", embroiling itself in a strain of

corruption scandals and distancing itself from structural reforms and genuine transition on the path to EU membership.

Law on Religion as a trigger of change

At the very beginning of 2020 things looked stable for the DPS as the ruling elite was bracing itself for yet another victory on general elections. Notwithstanding, the situation had changed dramatically with the adoption of the “Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Legal Status of Religious Communities”. The Law was adopted on 27 December 2019 in Montenegrin Parliament, and came into force a day after Christmas that is observed in Montenegro on 7 January. In spite of government’s intention to pass the bill into law smoothly, the adoption of the Law stirred strife in the Parliament, and soon after its adoption protests broke out in almost every city in Montenegro. The protests were organized in Orthodox processions called *litije* (*litije*), and every week tens of thousands of protestors took to the street, in a nation of just 630 thousand inhabitants.

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The *litije* were guided by the SPC, namely the leader of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Archbishop of Cetinje and Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije Radović. After decades of close friendship and alliance with Milo Đukanović, top cleric of the SPC Radović, who passed away just two months after the 30 August general election due to the consequences of Covid-19 infection, turned into a bitter adversary of the Montenegrin president. The stumbling stone of the Law were articles 61, 62 and 63 in the Law totaling 66 articles, and especially the provision saying that “religious buildings and land used by the religious communities in the territory of Montenegro which were built or obtained from public revenues of the state or were owned by the state until 1 December 1918, and for which there is no evidence of ownership by the religious communities, as cultural heritage of Montenegro, shall constitute state property.” The SPC interpreted these articles of the Law as an attack and an attempt to seize its properties from it on different locations of Montenegro. As the presence of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro dates back to medieval times, many of documents proving the ownership were lost during the Ottoman rule as the Ottoman Turks frequently targeted Orthodox monasteries as centers of Montenegrin rebellion against their rule. Among these properties that are in the SPC’s possession are, among others, flagship Montenegrin monasteries Cetinje, Ostrog and

Morača, and a parcel of land in Buljarica near the coastal city of Petrovac, ideal for development of tourist projects. Amfilohije Radović and the SPC did not face a difficult task in mobilizing protestors in January 2020 as Orthodoxy is deeply rooted in Montenegrin nation which for centuries lived in theocratic society, ruled by leaders called “vladika”, who embodied at the same time both spiritual and secular power.

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By early March lities have been taking place for two months and DPS’s rule was seriously shaken. Another blow was dealt to the ruling party by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown that severely damaged Montenegrin tourism industry, with the number of tourist arrivals shrinking more than 85%. After the restrictive measures of the first lockdown were lifted, the lities continued in the summer of 2020, and coupled with the bleak economic performance, the discontent of the Montenegrin citizens was bound to be demonstrated on the 30 August general elections.

Opposition wins by a narrow margin

The 30 August general elections have caught the DPS on the wrong foot, and the opposition parties managed to win 41 seats in the 81 members Parliament. Even so, the DPS has remained the party with the strongest support of the voters, winning over 35% of the popular votes. Second was the populist political collation For the Future of Montenegro (*Za budućnost Crne Gore*) lagging behind DPS by just 2.5 percentage points. This coalition was extremely heterogeneous, including two alliances of parties and a number of other parties who represent, among others, Serbian minority in the country, conservatives and socialists.

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The strongest political force within this group of alliances and parties was the Democratic Front (DF - *Demokratski front*), with three key political leaders: Nebojša Medojević, a Montenegrin conservative, Andrija Mandić, a Montenegrin Serb politician and Milan Knežević, a Montenegrin politician with pro-Serbian orientation. Due to the colorful nature of the For the Future of Montenegro, this collation decided to nominate Zdravko Krivokapić, a university professor with little or no political

experience prior to the 30 August election, as their leader. Krivokapić seemed both neutral enough and acceptable as a leader of these very diverse political coalition. Second big political opposition coalition winning 10 seats on the general elections was Peace is Our Nation (*Mir je naša nacija*) formed just a month and a half before the general elections, comprising of pro-European parties and lead by Aleksa Bečić. The third major opposition political force was the Civic Movement United Reform Action (URA - *Građanski Pokret Ujedinjena reformska akcija*), a social-liberal and green party, led by an ethnic Albanian Dritan Abazović, and winning four seats in the Parliament. Looking at these coalitions and parties leads to two conclusions: the opposition was heterogeneous and with no common values and visions for the future of Montenegro and its only common denominator was overthrowing the DPS of Milo Đukanović. Furthermore, regardless of the vast spectrum of different parties and alliances, the opposition managed to win only one seat more than the DPS and the minor parties that support it. Nonetheless, president Đukanović gave the mandate to the united opposition and the new government was appointed on 4 December 2020, after more than three months of harmonization process between very distinct interests of all parties involved in the opposition front. The compromising policy extended to the formation of the government as every member

of the cabinet is an independent politician, even though nominated by the above mentioned two major coalitions and URA. As the appointing of the new government took a painstaking process of exhausting negotiation among opposition leaders, the functioning of the government is also questionable as it is hard to see who pulls the strings and who is running the show.

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Prime Minister Krivokapić lacks political experience and it will be very hard for him to impose himself as a true leader, as he has no solid political supporting base and has no charisma. To the contrary, Deputy Prime Minister Abazović is a young and charismatic leader who managed to make the best of the election results in the new government for his small party URA. Aleksa Bečić does not take part in the executive branch, but as Speaker of the Parliament, he holds significant political power in his hands which every other oppositional leader has to take into account. Still, almost three months after the formation the government does not inspire confidence among either the citizens of Montenegro nor the international community.

Conclusion

Željko Ivanović, human rights activist and founder of the first independent daily newspaper *Vijesti*, the biggest media outlet in Montenegro, wrote in his column after the formation of the government the following: „Had Đukanović packed his suitcase in 2006, Montenegro would have been reconciled and not divided, it would have been member of the EU, without remarks about the private state, captured judiciary, endemic corruption and brotherhood of politicians and mobsters.” However, at this moment with the new government in power, and the one that for the first time in thirty years does not have Đukanović’s DPS members, it is still hard to see how Montenegro will manage to tackle these phenomena that tear apart its society. Although the country is still the leader in EU integration among the six Western Balkans states, it is unfortunately hard to fathom that it will join the European club before 2030. The same goes for other candidate and potential candidate states in the region. The EU is faced with a number of issues, and Brexit left a void that the EU is now filling with its reflection on the future of Europe. As the EU lacks appetite to continue the enlargement process, other players step in to protect their interests in this small Adriatic country. With a number of pro-Serbian politicians in the parliament and the

government, Serbia has regained some of the clout it had lost after the 2006 independence referendum in Montenegro. Corona-crisis has manifested in a number of occasions strong links of Serbia with Russia and China, and these powers use Serbia to spread their influence in its neighborhood, including Montenegro. China is also making its presence stronger through the construction of the Bar-Boljare motorway, the construction of which Montenegro designated to China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC). On the other hand, the new administration in Washington is aware of the exposure of the region to the outside powers, not just to Russia and China, but also to Turkey. Furthermore, pro-Serbian orientation of some politicians in the new government will hardly influence the pro-EU and pro-Western orientation of the country. However, Montenegro needs to clear the clutter in its own backyard, and finally, after long reign of DPS, set its course to reform its society and thus complete the transition period. In the meantime, the EU could turn its focus again to this region, and Montenegro will seek not to be coupled with other countries in the region, but rather be granted the membership in the EU individually.

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