



Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro Political briefing:
Political developments in Montenegro**
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Introduction

In the last two decades, the basic leitmotiv of the political situation in Montenegro has always been “the Serb(ian) question”. In pre-independence period (before 2006), it was reflected in the main political cleavage between pro-European independentists and pro-Serb unionists. The legacy of this period, with some “mis-en-scenic” alterations, remained politically acute to this day and is mainly reflected in a stark cleavage between Euro-Atlantic FP goals of the ruling political party (DPS) and Eurosceptic, pro-Serbian, or even, “Russia-friendly” aspirations of the unruly opposition. Ruling DPS party, which can be epitomized as a ‘state apparatus pretending to be a political party’,¹ uses its almost total political clout over the state institutions, media and academia to reinvigorate the existing cleavage and hyphen its liberal and democratic progressivism against “Oriental despotism”² behind the opposition’s agenda. Another legacy of the pre-independence period is rather unusual level of ethnic tolerance between majoritarian Montenegrins (and Serbs!) on the one side, and Albanian, Bosniak and Croat minorities on the other, which could be regarded as one of the most tangible achievements of the DPS regime in pre-independence period. However, since a long-standing (almost 30 years) DPS regime needs strong cleavages to hold a power, a great deal of the political processes in the country is devoted to hedge the risk of Serbs (or pro-Serb forces) prevailing over Montenegrins and accommodating the demands of the minorities to maintain their loyalty.

To put it more recently, Montenegrin political and quasi-ethnic cleavage has been fermenting from 2013. The government led by Machiavellian DPS and its leader Milo Djukanovic has been plagued by serious accusations of the connections with organized crime, masterminding systematic corruption that

¹ See: Ivica Bakota, Political developments in independent Montenegro, 2017

² Word used by some of DPS politicians and party mouthpieces.

involved not only embezzlement, but also electoral frauds, grand-scale cronyism, influencing the media and the intimidation of political opponents. A series of protests organized by incoherent “genuine” opposition parties and political groups with pro-Serb inclinations started over dramatic accusations against brutal politics and corruption of ruling DPS. From 2014 oppositional groups gathered around DF took the streets in not so much massive but rather continuous protests which in conjunction with the elections in October 2015 heated up to a large-scale protest. In the parliamentary elections in October 2016, notwithstanding the boycott and fraud accusations from some of the opposition parties, DPS managed to secure a margin for the next 4-year term. However, in the aftermath of the elections, Montenegrin security forces prevented the murder attempt on the incumbent PM Djukanovic and Montenegro in the last moment avoided *coup d'état* that was allegedly organized by some Serbian and Russian citizens. After months of investigations, Montenegrin Attorney General finger pointed to Russian security apparatus as behind the coup attempt. Coup attempt trials gave a new impetus to DPS government led by Djukanovic close aide Markovic to step up NATO integration policy and enjoying the strong support of the West (US and the EU) to refute the opposition as conspiring the ‘Russian candidate’ or denigrating democratic institutions and procedures while continuing with the boycott of the parliamentary work.

This briefing report provides the political context and the insights from the first year of Markovic administration. It focuses on the general context in which the new government has emerged, the shifts that have occurred in its relations with the opposition and their implications for Montenegro’s political situation.

From the coup attempt to the NATO accession

As a politically divided country, Montenegro has undergone frequent episodes of tensions between ruling DPS and oppositional parties. From 2015, DF led opposition started to assume para-systemic attitude towards ruling DPS government: organizing several small-scale protests, backing all anti-

government protests, openly demanding toppling down DPS regime and boycotting parliamentary dialogue with DPS politicians. Two months before scheduled parliamentary elections in October 2016, DPS was left without any political partner and decided to run the campaign independently. Opposition parties haven't succeeded in organizing united platform with one candidate, but focused campaign on divisive matters such as the referendum on NATO membership and DPS's electoral frauds. Nevertheless, after playing upon oppositional divisions, DPS won by margin and continued to hold power for another 4-year term.

Day after the October 2016 elections, the government dramatically revealed the evidence obtained from Montenegro's Security & Intelligence Bureau (BIA) that some agents tried to execute PM Djukanovic in immediate aftermath of the election and thus stir the chaos that would facilitate *coup d'etat*. This incident formed the watershed between ruling DPS and the opposition parties that has been recast in DPS propaganda ever since. With the efforts of the new government, Special Prosecutor Katnic was tasked with a mission to investigate the background of the coup attempt and to interrogate several Montenegrins and Serbians involved in the plot. With the country's resolute advance towards NATO membership, now the SPO task enjoyed strong support by the West where the coup attempt has been depicted as an example of the failure of Russian propaganda and plots to thwart NATO accession. By spring 2017, the SPO brought up several cases that, among others, reveal some high-profile Russian former intelligence officer, "that have had even obtained the security clearance for attending security meetings with Putin"³ as a one of the chief organizers. Overall, investigations that had turned on possible involvement of some opposition leaders in the plot purported with subtle dosing of "anti-Russian hysteria" in the media proved successful in regaining the grip on DPS's capital FP project (NATO accession) and further decimated oppositional unity whose boycott over a time seemed atoned in incoherent denial.

³ Vijesti, 12.6.2017.

Yet, on the diplomatic level, Montenegro's accession to NATO experienced certain hiccup during the transition in the US administration after Trump took the office in January. The motion for US Senate's ratification of Montenegro's membership was unusually stalled on the Senate's agenda pending the necessary readjustments with Trump's Russia policy and possible high-level meeting between the two heads that will determine the outcome of the US commitment for the further NATO enlargement. However, as the high-level US-Russia summit seemed unlikely for time being, it signalled that the State Department should go back to "business as usual" regarding the NATO enlargement agenda. In ending days of April, Senate quickly approved the vote on the Montenegro's accession and within a week ratified the decision. Montenegro was officially admitted into the organization on the NATO summit in Brussels on the next month.

NATO accession gave a strong impetus to Montenegrin government for furthering the EU negotiations. Until May-June 2017, Montenegro opened chapters 1 (Free movement of goods) and 22 (Regional policy) and closed important chapter on External relations (ch. 30). At the same time, Montenegrin government started to prepare for hosting NATO sponsored Adriatic Chapter summit in August, with the US Vice President Pence as the highest guest, which gave the government high grounds to boost Montenegro's international standing to domestic audience. US Vice President, several State Department officials send "a strong message" that the US and the EU has unison stance regarding the uncooperative boycott from the opposition and further silenced their demands for the new elections.

Slight disappointment occurred in August, when EU Commission submitted report announcing a year 2025 as the earliest possible date for the next 'joint enlargement'. Both sides of the parliament floor have criticized the report. Ruling DPS was dissatisfied with the date and the joint enlargement, while the opposition raised their doubts on the Euro-enthusiasm lasting for the next five years and depicted the remaining interim period as a "window of

opportunity” for the opposition to assume power and lead Montenegro into the EU.

From Niksic elections to November local elections

The coup attempt has substantially reconfigured the balance between the opposition and the ruling party. For one, Markovic’s government regained the public support that has been seriously shaken throughout the political crisis from October 2015 opposition’s protests, through DPS-SDP split in January 2017 and culminating in the halfway successful ‘cordon sanitaire’ the opposition parties created around DPS in advent of October 2016 parliamentary elections. At the same time, government’s insistence to investigate the coup attempt and revealed evidence of the involvement of some of the major opposition figures in the plot decreased the public support for “extra-parliamentary” ways the opposition tried to gain the power and depicted the government as the only stable defender of the constitutional order. Many of the formerly moderate figures within Montenegrin political elite became increasingly alienated from the idea to ‘topple down DPS regime’ by violent means and the government won over the ‘silent majority’ inserting that the parliament is the only *locus* for the political combat.

However, the main opposition parties seemed to be unprepared for this game changer. Almost all opposition parties claimed that the coup attempt was staged by DPS, rejected electoral results and decided to boycott the parliament until the new elections. During the boycott, the main oppositional parties gathered around DF (Democratic Front) coalition continued its media and grassroot campaign with aim to stage large-scale protests and force the government to announce the date for the new elections. By the time SPO raised the cases against the leading DF figures Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic, accusing them to be involved in the coup attempt, public opinion was more swayed to accept “foreign plotters and local fifth column” scenario instead of “DPS’ masterminding plan” from opposition’s propaganda.

Be that as it may, the cases against the DF leaders served as a pretext for the opposition to boycott Niksic elections in March. Regarded as a ‘referendum vote’ for government’s NATO policy and the SPO work, these elections were also supposed to be decisive battle against extra-parliamentary activities of the opposition. With too much at the stake, the opposition have chosen not to pick a battle this time and the DPS was left to win “one-party elections”. Symbolically, both sides got something while staying entrenched in their positions: DPS cleared off the risk of the organized opposition threatening the stability in the crucial period pending the NATO accession, the opposition retained ‘symbolic capital’ of the boycott and a time to consolidate the anti-DPS platform.

However, without any support from the West and torn apart by the leadership quarrels and the boycott agenda the opposition increasingly seemed lacking cohesive force. On the local elections in November disagreements between “uncooperative” parties (DF, DEMOS) and so called “civic opposition” (SDP, URA, DCG) has become more tangible. Latter three parties contested DPS in Cetinje, Mojkovac and Petnjica. Yet, despite some irregularities and vote buying reports, the results clearly signified the victory for DPS. Not only DPS had won a clear majority in the North region (Mojkovac, Petnjica), but it also secured plurality in ‘swing municipality’ of Cetinje and Albanian-dominated Tuzi township.

Overall, after little more than a year since DPS seemed to be (once again) doomed to relinquish the power on the elections, reinvigorated statesmanship the party assumed with the coup attempt investigations and the NATO accession proved that the ‘party backed by state apparatus’ is still resourceful enough to come out as cross-ethnic and cross-wing “Un-party”. Moreover, discussions on the party’s candidate for the upcoming presidential elections in April seem to suggest that ‘eternal Milo’ - only a year ago a dissenting figure that had to step down as a PM – might make a comeback as the next president of Montenegro.