



# Weekly Briefing

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

Since the announcement the next presidential elections for April 15, Montenegrin media outlets have increasingly get focused on the cast for the third presidential campaign, and what seemed to be downplayed as ‘bureaucratic’ transition in fully parliamentary system of government became a ‘decisive battle between the opposition and the incumbent government’. In January, when the President of Parliament announced the elections, media hardly reported more than a couple of sentences on prospective successor of the President Vujanovic (DPS). As a matter of fact, political activities in preparation for the presidential elections have been absent for a month, however, the ‘return’ of some of the main oppositional figures to the Parliament by the end of February signaled increased cross-bench activities to negotiate the single opposition candidate.

The last (second) presidential elections have been a ‘testing ground’ for the opposition in bringing up the single candidate able to stand in the second round against the DPS candidate. In April 2013, incumbent President Vujanovic won re-election by a narrow margin and amid controversies regarding the legality of his second term as he presided over Montenegro in ‘transitional phase’ following the independence referendum (2006-08). On top of that, official results of the second round counted the margin of only around 3000 votes that secured the victory for Vujanovic against independent Lekic (who enjoyed broad support from the opposition) and left a space for various speculations on rigged and fraudulent elections. As mentioned in the previous report, a stark political cleavage between the ruling DPS and the opposition – especially between DPS and the cluster of pro-Serb and anti-NATO parties gathered around the Democratic Front coalition (DF) most likely will again determinate the main rivals in 2018 presidential elections. However, after the NATO accession, the coup attempt trials and the boycott of the opposition the election campaign that is currently evolving might bring some unexpected novelties.

This report will discuss the significance of the pending elections, its influence on the Montenegro's political future and try to pick out some traces that could predict its outcome.

### **President of Montenegro or/ and President of the Montenegrins**

Unlike all other countries in the WB and the SEE, Montenegro has never experienced a (power) transition within the (overall) transition, hence in spite of the rather successful consolidation of power the 'lateral pressure' for a transition continues to rise by every new call for elections. Presidential elections in Montenegro are thus potentially significant locus for power shifts for (at least) three reasons. First, the mere representational function of the President mostly invigorates ideological differences and black-and-white discourse where the ruling party has to be resourceful enough to set off the place, content and dynamics of ideological confrontation, or otherwise risks "Milosevic hybris" on 2000 elections. Second, presidential elections might have the second round which, given the electoral system of Montenegro, is one of the rare opportunities where regime's candidate confronts the whole opposition and thus constitutes one of "neuralgic points" for its legitimacy. Third, historically, Montenegro's only "partial power transition" in 1998 had started after Presidential elections (held a year before) which proved to be auspicious for furthering the inter-party split and the timing for parliamentary elections (May 1998) that have seen the decisive victory of pro-independence faction led by Djukanovic.

In this sense, given the creeping 'lateral pressure', "second-round anxiety" and historical precedent the next presidential elections cannot catch the ruling party off-guard – regardless of the recent spike in approval rates following the NATO accession, the coup attempt trials and successful downplaying oppositional boycott.

If the main concerns of the ruling DPS can be summed up in one dilemma, it would be finding the candidate that could win over quasi-ethnic cleavages, in a word, the next President of (multi-ethnic) Montenegro instead of the President

of the Montenegrins. As a proto-independentist and pro-European party, DPS might have difficulties finding the candidate that could uphold the DPS agenda and yet be a political ‘middleman’ able to convey political messages tuned for the both sides of the aisle, as well as to match the ‘pedigree’ of Vujanovic.

Outgoing President Vujanovic has been regarded as a person that during the long political career has maintained pro-independentist course and yet a low-profile in quasi-ethnic cleavages. His moderate approach regarding the national question has been the source of conflict between DPS and its minor coalition partner SDP prior the 2013 presidential elections; however, it was also a valuable asset for conciliatory role the President assumed during the parliamentary crisis (2014-15). Moreover, Vujanovic made remarkable political *difference* by protecting the property rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church against the nascent Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which as a result created the paradoxical situation where the former continued to enjoy popular legitimacy as the highest religious authority; played down identity politics in matters such as the recognition of independent Montenegrin language (as separate from Serbian), even, being generously dismissive on the statements regarding “consubstantiality” of Serbian and Montenegrin nation uttered by some Serbian high-level politicians; and maintained frictionless correspondence with Serbian leaders when the crisis peaked in bilateral relations. It should not be neglected that his family background (admittedly with Chetnik affiliations) and personal upbringing (born and raised in Belgrade) have also helped to position him as a person that suits the taste of oppositional electorate.

### **Lack of Middlemen**

Even though DPS have started internal discussions and screenings for the potential candidates in January, the reluctance to disclose the name of the candidate may signal internal disagreements, but most likely, inability to single out one candidate that could be a ‘middleman’ in the long run. According to the media, after internal deliberations, the Main Board of DPS in the March

published three names of potential candidates. First is current party chairman Milo Djukanovic, whose personal charisma and internal support are beyond questioning. However, as much as his nomination might be the winning ticket in mobilizing DPS electorate, he clearly lacks ‘middlemanship’ and as an experienced politician is aware that he would more likely be a divisive figure in the long run. Therefore, he declared no personal ambition to become the next President and, in spite of the fact, that he is only recently quoted saying that “[running for the next President] would not be [his] primary choice”, he probably, at the first place, initiated the internal quest for the right candidate. Second on the list is the Defense Minister Milica Pejanovic-Djurisic. This university professor and professional diplomat (both for the Union and Montenegro) has been the founder of DPS and staunch independentist, being one of the closest associates of Djukanovic from internal struggles in 1997. She served as the Defense Minister in three successive governments, being the first woman to hold this office and longest serving minister in Montenegro’s history. Her nomination so far “ticks most of the boxes” (woman, independentist, old DPS cadre, pro-European, well-educated, diplomat), except for the fact that she does not have strong party support (especially among the younger generation) and is far to match Vujanovic’s “charm” in dealing with pro-Serb political force. The third potential candidate, Deputy PM Milutin Simovic has party support, but lacks national recognition, and according to the internal analysis, his approval rate goes under some possible candidates from the opposition.

Overall, in little more than a month until the elections, DPS still hasn’t decided the right candidate. Discussion is ongoing and the Main Board announced the decision to be reached by this week. Even though the decision is short-listed, some opinions are not excluding the possibility of a ‘dark horse’ candidate since the stalling with the decision has been regarded as a tactical move to pick out the candidate that can stand against the main oppositional candidate.

## **Chicken game with the opposition**

Being strategically disadvantaged by picking the single candidate that should stand (potentially) against the whole opposition, the ruling party found a tactical retreat in being less precipitous with the decision. As a matter of fact, it may seem that during the last few weeks while the opposition parties engaged in strenuous negotiations to nominate a single candidate, DPS carefully observed from which camp the archrival to their candidate should arrive.

So far, it is certain that he will come from “civic opposition”. On February 27, #Gradjanski (Civilian) group gathering “intellectuals and prominent activists” appeared on Facebook, calling for the nomination of ex-MP Mladen Bojanic as the single opposition candidate. Soon, the Democrats (DCG), a parvenu populist party found after the split with SNP in 2015 (with poll ratings second to DPS), endorsed Bojanic and started ‘big tent’ campaign. The second most prominent ‘civic’ party, Civic movement URA also accepted Bojanic nomination. By March 10, pro-Serb Democratic Front coalition (NOVA, PzP, DNP et al.) under the catchphrase “either we or him (i.e. Milo Djukanovic)” announced its support for a single opposition candidate and endorsed Bojanic. Although a former MP, Bojanic figures as a “new face” and judging from his untainted personal background and not much outspoken manner he is more likely “picked and chosen” as a middleman able to reach the second round.

However, several other candidates have also announced the campaign. Apart from some low-appealing names, a leader of the anti-NATO movement “Resistance against Despair” Marko Milacic has already started a campaign on single-issue to “balance back Russian and Serbian support”. The leader of a conservative UCG (formerly under DF umbrella) Goran Danilovic have also announced the candidacy amid harsh accusations from the DF blaming him for undermining the unity of the opposition. Nevertheless, a suspected Trojan horse might arrive from SDP - a long-term satellite party of DPS that switched sides in 2016. Their MP Draginja Vuksanovic has already started to collect the signatures for the candidacy and is expected to be endorsed by the party.

In the circumstances where the (main) oppositional candidates are already known, DPS has a less challenging task to, within the next few days, assess the marginal advantage of its own candidate(s). According to the polls, its candidate has a good chance to win the elections in the first round which as much as it is comforting also instigates more deliberations and more scrutiny in picking the right candidate. Apart from the risk of electoral defeat (which would probably stem from underestimated 'lateral pressure' and 'second round anxiety'), the main challenge for the ruling party's candidate is not only to defeat oppositional rivals but is most certainly projected more in the future: to secure a middleman able to stand increasingly stronger para-parliamentary lateral pressure for a power transition. This is the task Vujanovic excelled, Djukanovic would not fit and Pejanovic-Djurisic is yet to prove herself.