



Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro Political briefing:
Presidential campaign
Ivica Bakota**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.



+36 1 5858 690



office@china-cee.eu



china-cee.eu

Presidential campaign

Introduction

After Milo Djukanovic announced that he will run for a president as a DPS candidate and started his campaign by the mid of March, a few other issues got more media coverage than the ongoing presidential campaign. As summarized in previous report, a political battle is in full steam between seven nominees, out of which the three candidates stand chance to pass through the first round. These are: Milo Djukanovic (DPS, also endorsed by some minority parties), Mladen Bojanic (Dems, DF, URA), Draginja Vuksanovic (SDP and DEMOS), and maybe, Marko Milacic (True Montenegro) as a “honorable mention”.

After his initial reluctance to stand as the nominee of the DPS in the upcoming presidential elections, ex-PM Djukanovic pledged to return to be a "President of all citizens". His candidacy, however, has been shadowed with unsuccessful inter-party “primaries” where no other candidate was estimated to stand against the opposition candidates, leaving Djukanovic to do the stunt performance himself. On the other hand, Mladen Bojanic, announced on 5 March that he would seek the presidency as a “pan-opposition candidate”, a position he secured in a ‘big-tent’ campaign by the Democrats, URA and the Democratic Front coalition with the backing of around 35% against Djukanovic’s 50-52% according to the most recent polls. His ratings so far succeeded the other candidates from the opposition, dubbed as either too-extreme-to-win or DPS’ Trojan horses. Marko Milacic with his anti-NATO campaign is believed to be in the former group, Draginja Vuksanovic for her civic and urban appeal to the latter, while for Serb List candidate Dobrilo Dedeic is rumored to be a hybrid between the two.

The nominations for the elections were confirmed in March 28, scheduling the first round for 15 April, with a runoff on 29 April if no candidate received more than 50% of the vote. The Electoral Commission ultimately determined

that seven candidates qualified to compete in the elections, who besides aforementioned candidates also include: Hazbija Kalac (leader of the extra-parliamentary Justice and Reconciliation Party, deridingly dubbed “Erdogan’s [race] horse”) and independent Vasilije Milickovic (businessman with support of some diaspora organizations).

Anti-campaign as usual

As expected, soon after the candidates started trailing around Montenegro the campaign turned to an anti-campaign against all other candidates. Judging from the first headlines in the most influential newspapers, the candidates engaged in the smear campaign against the opponent(s)´ political and social background, moral standing or career stains, rarely, if ever, contesting the opinions, political standings and programs. In such political atmosphere, the political programs itself (if read) are rarely scrutinized, compared or cross-examined and much of the promises written there are taken as a mere face value - or otherwise could be found paradoxically sharing striking similarities to each other.

The “honorable” exception this time is Marko Milacic’s campaign whose early single-issue campaign appealed to those “pockets of society” still believing that NATO accession can be reconsidered and reversed. He reaffirmed his interest in the “balancing foreign policy” and emphasized his affiliations with Russia by bragging with the acquaintances in Russian top business circles (allegedly interested to invest billions of EUR in Montenegro), publicly “comforting” Russian honorable consul in Montenegro who was about to be expelled as a token of solidarity with the UK in its diplomatic row against Russia over Skripal’s poisoning. Milacic has also took a mild unionist stance by embracing Serbian FP balancing, admitting “uniethnicity” of the Serbs and Montenegrins and advocating establishment of “special relationship” between Podgorica and Belgrade. Finally, his anti-campaign is also tuned against

Djukanovic's 'radical turn to the West' as an anti-democratic, oligarchic move made to protect his business turf.

Obviously, the main political battle will emerge in the Djukanovic-Bojanic-Vuksanovic triangle, which as far as the most media outlets and social media comments so far suggested, has taken very predictable trajectory. In mathematically precise terms it can be described as "anti-regime vs. anti-utopian" vector between Vuksanovic and Djukanovic and "anti-government vs. anti-desperados" vector between Bojanic and Djukanovic. There is also less dominant "anti-populist vs. anti-elitist" vector between Vuksanovic and Bojanic that could be exacerbated in final stages of the campaign.

Djukanovic's both challengers have single-pointed their campaign buzzwords against the crooked and resilient "dictatorship" and the ruthless "pillage" done by business elites under Djukanovic political patronage. However, where Bojanic has an all-inclusive, populist appeal reflecting the heterogeneity of political parties behind him, Vuksanovic has less diffused strategy and more precisely attacks authoritarian features of the Djukanovic regime.

Djukanovic-Bojanic-Vuksanovic triangle

Djukanovic's response to Bojanic is hence more astute and condescending. In contrast to Bojanic's worn out remarks on Djukanovic's connections with mafia and tepid warnings on impending dictatorship should Djukanovic win the elections, Djukanovic spoke of a "irresponsible promises that could not be kept" and re-emphasized the importance of prudent independentism as opposed to opposition's subservience "to any foreign actor that taps its shoulder". In the most recent speeches he depicted the opposition as an unruly "bunch of people" that have unsuccessfully tried to stage a coup, hold anti-constitutional political positions, insist on uncommunicative boycott, display aggressive and amateurish behavior in public, in a word, calling them "political desperados". He seldomly questioned Bojanic's personal integrity and instead merely acknowledging his uncharismatic "middleman" position, his admonishments "talk over" Bojanic

and directly target opposition leaders, thus furtherly depersonalizing his candidacy. Moreover, by subverting broad “anti-government” appeal of the opposition, Djukanovic again managed to spin off “anti-constitutionality” and “anti-sovereignty” as ideas that subversively co-exist in the platform of the oppositional candidate, thus obtaining higher moral grounds, less divisive rhetoric and more sound appeal towards “undecided voters”.

If can be said that Djukanovic controls the place, content and dynamics of the confrontation with Bojanic, he is, on the other hand, less comfortable in his dealings with Vuksanovic. The first female presidential candidate with left wing political background has assumed the position of an ‘urban challenger’ to Djukanovic. As a university professor, she is more comfortable with pro-European etiquette, her campaign program has more clear-cut anti-regime underpinnings and her rhetoric is less dissuasive to urban middle class than Bojanic`s.

One of her first moves in the campaign was to reprimand the political opportunism within her own professional area by calling for a more active student participation in the politics. Although her message might have encountered generational gap, in fact, calling for critical and politically engaged voices “for which university was always a fertile ground” might be a bit off to a Montenegro`s student population which over the years was perceived as unusually passive vis-a-vis their counterparts in the other neighboring countries; however, she managed to ignite the “revolutionary spark” that sent off her campaign. During the course of the campaign, she spoke more elaborate and used “higher moral grounds” to depict transition injustices, criminal misdeeds and alienated elite as byproducts of the current regime. As a result, her ratings jumped from a low 4% to, according to some accounts, two digit figure. Moreover, depicted as a ‘Trojan horse’ of DPS at the start of campaign, she persuaded DEMOS, a “wannabe dissident” party, to switch support which help her to become a main “minor contender”.

The fact that Djukanovic is more uncomfortable with Vuksanovic is obvious in his attempts to downsize her anti-regime appeal by “putting her in the same basket” with Bojanic or by refuting the “changes” in her slogan with “realistic and down on earth” argumentation. In terms of the ‘politics of scale’, he can be at peace because the vote base of her party in the first round cannot amount to a more than 5% of votes and the rest she earns by her performance would likely reflect negatively on Bojanic’s score. However, she might be much more unpleasant contender in the TV debate that is scheduled this week, which given its impact on “undecided voters” and “particular fear” Djukanovic acquired for the debates is one of “neuralgic points” he would have to endure.

Political machines and theater left after

In emerging democracies of the post-communist Eastern Europe, a party organization that commands enough votes to maintain the political control in a state administration, business circles, NGO organizations, media etc. has been regarded as an essential element in procuring electoral victory and power consolidation. In these circumstances, “machine politics” was involved in yielding control behind-the-scenes, by enforcing electoral discipline along the lines of patronage and spoils system, while open political campaigns were run in order to— statistically speaking — win over undecided or “free” voters. The ratio of commanded and “free” voters has always been in a certain “transitional equilibrium”, strong enough to preclude frequent power transfers and “hung parliaments”, but loose enough to let some ‘independent’ to come about every now and then and to prevent elections turning to mere theatrical display of opinions. However, Montenegro was always a liminal case, where due to the population size, entrenched patronage and stark cleavages the political machine of the ruling party could preeminently yield just enough votes to call the victory. This disequilibrium of commanded voters was at display during the 2006 independence referendum (when the timing depended on the ruling party

assuring just above 55% of needed votes) and was mastered in the parliamentary and presidential elections hence after.

The importance of commanded voters has also been proved for these elections when a scandal with forged signatures occurred. On March 12, several dailies alleged that Marko Milacic submitted forged signatures for his nomination, inciting serious objections on the way signatures are “harvested” from the citizens. Yet, a more striking evidence of deeply entrenched political machine was the fact that irregularities in collecting little more than 7000 signatures needed for the official candidacy are discovered only after the other parties cross-checked their own internal lists to find that a couple of dozens of people do not quite fit as “free” voters.

To secure the victory in the first round, candidates need to obtain the support of around 160 000 votes (50% of registered voters), which statistically can be much lower in case of the low voter turnout and invalid votes. According to some unofficial estimates, Djukanovic so far controls around 95 000 votes and targets additional 20 000- 30 000 votes to finish with the victory in the first round. In spite of the poll results giving around 35% to the main contender Bojanic, he very likely has much less commanded votes and have to struggle to maintain current rating until the election day. Vuksanovic, just as all other candidates, control insignificant number of commanded votes and rely on “swing votes” as well as their own debate performances during the campaign.

The first round of the elections on 15 April thus cannot bring unexpected elimination of Djukanovic, but it is still unclear whether he would score a landslide victory or go in runoff with one of the (two) main contenders. Given the ‘lateral pressure’ and second-round ‘anxiety’ mentioned in the previous report as well as in the light of very intensified door-to-door campaigning, so far can be said that Djukanovic is clearly set to win over 30 000 “free” votes in the first round.