



Weekly Briefing

Montenegro Political briefing:

**The reality of the Montenegrin political scene - The continuation of the
antipodal views of the government and the opposition**

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Introduction

The events on the Montenegrin political scene during August and early September point to a continuation of disagreements between the ruling coalition and opposition parties, as well as the mild shocks among coalition partners. Additionally, the events at the opposition level point to the continuing weakness and inactivity of this part of the political actors.

The migrant crisis - a new political test for Montenegro

During few recent weeks, Montenegro's political scene has characterized the continuation of the disagreement between the authorities and the opposition on many issues, but the current migration crisis is on the forefront. Namely, at the end of August, the Government of Montenegro received a request from the government of Italy requesting from Montenegro to accept a part of 140 illegal migrants who arrived in Sicily. In addition, in 2018 more illegal crossings of the Montenegrin border were registered. Increasing numbers of illegal immigrants from Albania to Montenegro have influenced the Council of Defence and Security of Montenegro to make a decision on the engagement of the army in controlling the border, along with police. The question of migrants was also one of the priority topics at the meeting of Montenegrin Prime Minister Mr. Markovic and German Chancellor Ms. Merkel on August 17th.

These events have raised a storm on the Montenegrin political scene. The question of receiving the migrants is imposed not only on Montenegro, but also on some other Western Balkan countries, and it seems that such situations (like request from Italian government) will be more frequent in the near future. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a strong political debate on this topic.

At the beginning of September, the government of Montenegro issued a decision on acceptance of a part of the migrants from Italy, while some representatives of the opposition strongly opposed such a policy and used the period from the requests for acceptance until the decision of the Montenegrin government to express strong anti-immigrant views in public, and through social networks. Some of the opposition representatives (mainly representatives of Democratic Front (DF)) in the acceptance of migrants see a new problem in terms of national security, and point to the possible rise of crime and terrorism. On the other hand, the government is trying to show a responsible and solidary approach in relation to the current acceptance of migrants, and in general migration challenges, which, from a political point of view, is necessary for the country that is a candidate for membership in the European Union.

However, which message is sent by this Italian government's request sent at the end of August 2018? Political analysts agree that the EU's policy on resolving the issue of migrants during past year was much more conservative, and that it was a matter of moment when there will be a demand from Western Balkan countries to start taking over migrants. It seems that any plan for resolving this issue by the EU needs assistance from the Western Balkan countries who are on their road to EU integration. Of course, Montenegro is certainly among them. The security aspects of the migrant crisis are currently the most important political issue in the region and in Europe. Months are spent in debate about all aspects of this crisis, as many EU members are worried about security. Therefore, it is questionable whether the decision of the Montenegrin government may be a compromise or a response to the possible pressure on the countries that are in the EU accession negotiations process?

It may be expected that the issue of migrants will be more actualized in the coming months when a new wave of migrants is expected. The key political question is: What attitude should be taken regarding such illegal migration?

Such migrations do not necessarily have to be just a problem for a host country. Numerous analyses of international organizations and research papers

also point to the potential positive sides of migrant reception that can be viewed in various social and economic benefits, for example, filling in skills gaps, improving services, preventing aging and depopulation of certain areas, reducing the pension gap by paying contributions by employed migrants, increasing cultural diversity and the like. Nevertheless, on the one hand, the question is whether capacities for inclusion of migrants into the social life of Montenegro are adequate, and on the other hand, the question is how much is the motive of migrants to stay in Montenegro? It also seems that certain political elites see migrants as mere temporary ones, bearing in mind that migrants could again search for smuggling routes to reach some of the EU countries. Many research has shown that Montenegro (as well as other Western Balkan countries) is still seen by migrants as one of the transit countries.

Regardless of what kind of views are presented by political actors in Montenegro, it is clear that the migrant crisis has become another field of disagreement between the authorities and the opposition. But it is also clear that this political issue is not a national, but rather an international issue. Nevertheless, the consequences of the migrant crisis are beyond national frameworks and abilities of small countries such as Montenegro. Hence, it seems necessary to have a greater focus of Montenegrin politicians on establishing a common approach to the joint activities of the Western Balkan countries in resolving this complex issue. The previous focus seems to have been more on mutual accusations of intolerance or incompetence.

The opposition is fragmented and continues with the steady criticism of the ruling coalition

The political opposition in Montenegro over the past weeks has confirmed what it characterized during the previous period - absolute disagreement with the ruling coalition, but also the unanimous stance on many issues and mutual accusations within the opposition itself, that is, between the so-called "civic opposition" from one side and Democratic Front – DF on the other side.

Topics of criticism towards the Government are mostly repetitive, and they relate mainly to the bad economic policy and the allegations of corruption and increasing corruption. Nevertheless, the recent Transparency International Report indicates that Montenegro, with mark of 46, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index occupied the 64th position among 180 countries of the world. It had made slight progress compared to the previous report (Montenegro maintained the same position with the increase of number of points). Montenegro, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index 2017, ranked better than Bulgaria (71), Serbia (77), Kosovo (85), BiH (91), Albania (91) and Macedonia (107), while other region countries Slovenia (34), Croatia (57) and Romania (59) are in better positions. Therefore, the allegations made by the opposition about the increase in corruption can be understood as a need to maintain constant pressure on the government and maintain an active presence in the public.

In addition to the continuing disagreement with the government, the idea for forming a Montenegrin opposition bloc or unification of pro-Montenegrin opposition organizations and individuals was launched in August on the concept of former liberals and reformists from the 1990s. However, such an idea has not yet come to a significant resonance and has led to disagreement even within the party from which the initiator is.

All this points to the fact that the opposition suffers from chronic unification and lack of agreement on the development of the Montenegrin political corridor.

Economic policy - a source of possible disagreements in the ruling coalition

In addition to the migrant crisis that has deepened the disagreement between the government and opposition political parties, certain developments indicate a potential disagreement between the parties that make up the ruling

coalition. First of all, this refers to the attitude towards managing the airports in Montenegro.

Namely, at the beginning of August 2018, a public discussion on the concession act related to the airports in Montenegro was launched. Through public discussion, all interested parties will be able to submit their proposals and suggestions on the text of the concession act and the draft concession contract. The public discussion lasts until September 10, and is carried out by the Ministry of Transport and Maritime Affairs. Under this model, the airports in Podgorica, Tivat and Berane will be offered to private company for lease from 25 to 30 years.

This potential way of managing the airports was divided by a ruling coalition, where representatives of the largest party Democratic Party of Socialists - DPS's for the transfer of management through concession contracts

It is precisely this potential way managed by airports that divided the ruling coalition, where representatives of DPS's largest party, for the cession of management through concession contracts. This idea is supported by the representatives of the smaller coalition party, Bosniak party - BS, while the other Social Democrats - SD coalition party opposes such a model and advocates that airports should stay under state control with additional significant investments. Prime Minister Mr. Markovic pointed out that airports present a "bottle neck for faster growth in tourism". That the concession model is best for better valorisation of the airports in Montenegro is also considered in BS. On the other side, the SD believes that the airports of Montenegro are the most successful company in Montenegro whose success can be measured by the transport passengers and realized profit. SD also states that the granting of concessions "restricts the development of other airports, does not have a clear structure of foreseen investments and a strategy for further development of accessibility of Montenegro as a tourist destination, does not protect the rights of employees and is likely to lead to the closure of the national airline company Montenegro Airlines."

The issue of granting concessions was also discussed by opposition parties opposing the views of the Government and giving concessions to the airports, which further influenced the disagreement of the opposition's views and the largest political party DPS.

The Government's decision of granting concession was supported by the World Bank, stating that in this way large economic benefits can be achieved. First of all by introducing foreign direct investments, strengthening the profitability of the airports, actively developing new lines for transport passengers and contributing to tourism growth, employment, but also state revenues that can be used for other capital projects.

Issue of the division in the ruling coalition over the opposing views on the further management of airports will get importance and will be seen whether it will provoke sharper divisions in the ruling coalition in the upcoming period. Similar events (mostly disagreements on various economic issues) existed in the previous period, which led to the collapse of the ruling coalition when there was a disagreement between part of the Social Democratic Party - SDP and its party sympathizers (founders of SD) and DPS. However, it is unlikely that such a scenario will come this time. Although there are political disagreements about this very important issue for the economic development of Montenegro, it is very likely that the coalition partners will stay together on the political scene. As Montenegro can hardly be indebted and whose public debt makes 70% of GDP, the concession model for better valorisation of the airport remains a more probable scenario.