



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Montenegro Political briefing:**

**Political swing - “warm-cold” relations between the ruling and opposition parties**

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## **Political swing - “warm-cold” relations between the ruling and opposition parties**

Just as it seems that relations between the ruling and the opposition parties can be improved, a certain issue creates again so many divided opinions and becomes a dispute that, it seems only deepens the crisis in these relations. Recent developments on the Montenegrin political scene are just supporting this thesis.

### **Return to Parliament - a sign of improving relations**

Over the past weeks, the majority of opposition parties and their members in Parliament have decided to return to Parliament that has been boycotted for a long time. The boycott of the Parliament is currently supported largely by independent members, but also by the representatives of the Democrats and the Citizens' Movement URA. Nevertheless, these two parties also expressed their willingness to enter a temporary working group without interrupting the boycott of the Parliament, if government accepts their plan of electoral reforms that was submitted to the President of the Parliament. Also, what can be expected in the upcoming period is the return of opposition members of Parliament to parliamentary working bodies, and even members from the above-mentioned parties. This has already been announced by the representatives of the opposition parties - Social Democratic party and the Democratic Front.

Such decisions are definitely one step forward when it comes to the level of communication and cooperation between the ruling and opposition parties. However, it is certain that such a decision by the opposition leaders has not been made solely for the purpose of "dissolving" relations with the authorities. It is clear that the opposition will have major demands when it comes to returning to working bodies. It can be expected that the requirements will relate to key positions such as the heads of parliamentary committees. Some of these places

have already been held by the opposition before deciding to boycott Parliament and it is difficult to think that the opposition could discuss further co-operation and dialogue with the authorities without these demands. The minimum requirements will apply to the positions that the opposition had in the previous parliamentary convention, which is the position of the president of the Committee for Anti-corruption, Committee for economy and Committee for European integration. Leaders of Democratic Front are expected to delegate their representatives to parliamentary committees, after the Social Democratic Party (SDP) has already done this.

It seems that the representatives of the ruling parties will have nothing against such requests by the opposition, bearing in mind that recommendations related to the need for the return of the opposition to Parliament and working bodies are coming from Brussels. The confirmation comes also from the recent visit of the President of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, to the European Parliament. Montenegrin President at a press conference with the President of the European Parliament, said that from the first day there was open invitation to opposition for their return to Parliament and that there was no place for boycott.

Therefore, it could be expected that the opposition will take over the functions of committee chairpersons that belonged to it. That it will be easy to reach an agreement, can be seen from the statements of the Government representatives who have already approved the discussions on the conduct of the committee, saying that they will discuss this when all opposition parties return to Parliament. This is because the part of the places in committees belongs to the parties which have not yet returned to the Assembly.

### **Government's proposal of the Law on State Symbols and the Statehood Day of Montenegro - a new dispute between ruling and opposition parties**

At the beginning of October, the political scene was again agitated - the government prepared the Draft Law on State Symbols and the Statehood Day of Montenegro, which introduces the obligation to stand up during the intonation of

the national anthem, as well as an appropriate penal provision if the law is violated. Namely, if the Parliament of Montenegro adopts such government proposal, citizens who do not rise up during the performance of the national anthem will pay a fine of 300 EUR to 2,000 EUR. The new legal solution also stipulates that the obligation of municipalities and public institutions whose founder is state or municipality is to put the flag on institution building. If this provision is violated penalties for legal entities will amount from 300 to 20,000 EUR, for individuals from 300 to 2,000 EUR, and for entrepreneurs from 300 to 6,000 EUR.

This draft law has provoked various reactions of the Montenegrin public, and the leaders of the ruling and the opposition parties have also gave statements. Members of the Democratic Party of Socialists and Social Democrats (ruling parties) support this government proposal, while some of the opposition gathered around the Democratic Front, but also some other opposition parties, strongly oppose such a law proposal.

It is evident that after a potential rapprochement and the dissolution of the relationship between the government and the opposition, and the announced return to Parliament, a new topic has been created (at least temporarily), which again signals a strife at the political scene.

The opposition, as well as a part of civil society, are referring to democratic principles and states that the law proposal, as well as the state symbols itself, have not been made by agreement and consensus. In any case, it seems that it is not good in such way, i.e. through these penal provisions and repressive manner to regulate the relation of individual citizens towards the state symbols of Montenegro. However, the fact is that in the previous period there were many events initiated by the opposition which resulted in disrespect of state symbols. For example, when marking the days of some local governments (where the opposition has the majority) at the ceremonial sessions of some municipalities, there is no intonation of the anthem, nor a distinguished state flag. Therefore, the authors of the controversial law proposal justify the need for the state to

introduce order in this area. Their logic is that everyone does not have to love the country in which they live, but must respect it.

Therefore, it seems that this law proposal is one of the topics that should maintain disagreements between the government and the opposition. Unfortunately, this issue stretches to the core of the Montenegrin divisions and reflects the political reality in Montenegro. And this reality means survival on the political scene through further divisions and distancing. Because disagreements are expected when discussing the disputed law at some of the next sessions of the Montenegrin Parliament. Additional disagreements are expected after the opposition's return to Parliament and parliamentary working bodies. The struggle for the votes of either the ruling or opposition parties in Montenegro (but it seems without exception in other Western Balkan countries) is often based on the topics that lie within the framework of the national state, which is the crude reality of the political scene.

### **Reform of electoral legislation - an additional source of disagreements**

The ruling parties raised the issue of reforming electoral legislation and it is possible to expect a discussion on this topic soon. This is also one of the recommendations coming from the Brussels. Whether this reform will be significant, as claimed by the authorities, or it will only represent cosmetic changes to existing legislation, as some opposition leaders claim, remains to be seen. Nevertheless, this issue also raises many questions and disagreements. And it seems that these disagreements are presented more between opposition parties, than between the government and the opposition. Also, the opposition is not unique either on the proposal to form some sort of transitional government that would work on improving electoral legislation. Although representatives of the Ujedinjena Crna Gora (United Montenegro) claim that they stand behind such an idea, many doubt that such an idea originates outside of Montenegro, specifically from the Serbian president who himself called on the opposition

representing Serbian national interests to participate in any such project. Therefore, the idea of forming a government of national unity is opposed mostly by Democrats who do not want to leave any important initiatives to less significant parties.

However, it seems that there is nothing new on the political scene of Montenegro. Relations between the authorities and the opposition are like a swing where it's hard to find a balance. The survival of some opposition parties seems to be dependent on the hard deviation from the ruling parties, or the continuing crackdown with other opposition parties. And, they are successful in this. It seems, sometimes, that neither the government nor the opposition want to talk too much about the key economic problems or the need to reduce the huge bureaucratic apparatus that represents the stumbling block for further development.