



Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro political briefing:
Political review of Montenegro in 2023
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Summary

In 2023, Montenegro's political scene was deeply influenced by strategic manipulations and power struggles among political entities. The government, operating under a technical mandate, was criticized for its prolonged rule post a no-confidence vote. Presidential elections, heavily influenced by internal politics and Serbian interests, were tainted by controversies, including the disqualification of some candidates. This issue highlighted the pervasive political dishonesty in Montenegro. The Europe Now Movement (PES) candidate's victory, supported by pro-Serbian parties, suggested a shift towards Serbian influence in Montenegrin politics. The extraordinary parliamentary elections reflected a fragmented political landscape, with the PES seeking greater influence and the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) struggling to retain its voter base. The results indicated a divided electorate and complex government formation challenges. The involvement of PES with radical pro-Serbian and minority parties, while sidelining DPS, raised concerns about Montenegro's commitment to EU integration and sovereignty. The European Commission's "Montenegro 2023 Report" criticized the government's lack of commitment to EU integration, highlighting failures in judicial reform and political corruption. Overall, Montenegro's political environment in 2023 was marked by power-centric tactics, leading to political instability and challenges to its democratic integrity and European integration path.

Introduction

The political landscape of Montenegro in 2023 is marked by significant changes and challenges. The government in technical mandate, comprising a coalition led by the Civic Movement URA (URA) continued to lead the country during the major part of 2023. The key issues that defined the political climate included presidential elections in March¹ and April²,

¹ Presidential elections in Montenegro on March 19 (<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-izbori/32225660.html>)

² Milo Đukanović or Jakov Milatović; decision on April 2 (<https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/liveblog/2023/3/19/crna-gora-bira-predsjednika-izmedju-sedam-kandidata>)

followed by the extraordinary parliamentary elections in June³ and forming the new government in late October⁴. Also, some activities such as population census held in December⁵ fell under highly politicized issues. In addition, the external influences continued and partially shaped the political outcomes in Montenegro in 2023.

Presidential elections - changes in the political configuration of Montenegro

During 2023, Montenegro's political environment was significantly influenced by manipulative tactics used by political actors to gain and maintain power. In 2023, Montenegro entered the 2023 with the government, operating under a technical mandate, led by URA. Although the worst thing for a country is to be led for a long period by a government that was voted no-confidence in the parliament, that's exactly what happened. Namely, during 2023, the desire for the power and the satisfaction of personal interests caused the new government to be formed only at the end of the year, even though extraordinary parliamentary elections were held in June. However, the previous government tried to sabotage even the holding of those elections with its manipulative actions and decisions. Namely, the government, operating under a technical mandate, strategically scheduled the population census⁶ to reduce the likelihood of early parliamentary elections, thereby prolonging its authority.

However, first the presidential elections were held, which were eagerly awaited because the president was still from the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and his new candidacy stirred up the parties in power that wanted to take over that position as well. However, Serbia was particularly interested in these elections, for which the President of Montenegro from DPS was an obstacle to achieving greater influence through loyal parties that already participated in

³ Extraordinary parliamentary elections in Montenegro on June 11 (<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vanredni-parlamentarni-izbori-crna-gora-djukanovic/32322823.html>)

⁴ After an all-night session, the new Government of Montenegro was elected (<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-dobila-novu-vladu/32660274.html>)

⁵ MONSTAT: CENSUS OF POPULATION, HOUSEHOLDS AND DWELLINGS STARTS DECEMBER 3 (<https://mondo.me/info/Crna-gora/a1207236/Monstat-popis-odlozen-za-3.-decembar.html>)

⁶ Government of Montenegro, The Decree on Determining the Period of the Census of the Population, Households and Dwellings and the Reference Moment of the Census (available at: <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/3d2f5120-78c8-42bb-beee-811a7cc529ab>)

the government. However, the very act of running for these elections showed all the dirtiness and dishonesty to which the actors of the Montenegrin political scene are prone.

The dishonesty of presidential election candidates in Montenegro in 2023 was notably marked by the disqualification of a candidate of newly formed PES due to dual citizenship.⁷ This incident highlighted deceptive practices among candidates, such as concealing important personal information that directly impacts their eligibility.⁸ It underscored a broader issue of political dishonesty, where candidates were willing to mislead the public and manipulate legal loopholes to secure their position in the race, reflecting a troubling trend in the political ethics of the country. Nevertheless, the fact that one of the candidates supported by the pro-Serbian parties also had dual citizenship but continued his candidacy, indicates behind-the-scenes actions not only between the parties but also within PES.⁹

Additionally, the election of Constitutional Court judges in February¹⁰ highlighted the pervasive political control over supposedly independent institutions, with parties prioritizing their interests over judicial independence. These events collectively showcased a troubling disregard for responsible governance, with politicians favoring power and self-interest over democratic principles and the national interest. These developments in early 2023 collectively pointed to a political culture prioritizing power and self-interest over democratic integrity and the national interest, raising concerns about the future of responsible governance in Montenegro.

The presidential elections, with various candidates including influencers and traditional politicians, were crucial due to Montenegro's numerous societal divisions and economic

⁷ Ministry of Interior of Serbia: Spajić has a residence in Serbia, Mandić does not (<https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/643281/mup-srbije-spajic-ima-prebivaliste-u-srbiji-mandic-nema>)

⁸ In the Parliament, Spajić misled the public that he does not have dual citizenship (<https://www.standard.co.me/politika/spajic-i-u-skupstini-obmanuo-javnost-da-nema-dvojino-drzavljanstvo-video/>)

⁹ Europe now: DPS and DF agree on tactics to disqualify Spajić (<https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/evropa-sad-dps-i-df-dogovaraju-taktiku-za-diskvalifikaciju-spajica>)

¹⁰ Parliament of Montenegro, announcement: "Sitting of Third Extraordinary Session in 2023 ends, electing tree Constitutional Court judges" (available at: <https://www.skupstina.me/en/articles/sitting-of-third-extraordinary-session-in-2023-ends-electing-tree-constitutional-court-judges>)

challenges. These elections were expected to go to a second round, which happened. The first round of presidential elections, held on March 19, highlighted the societal and economic issues facing Montenegro, with no clear winner in the first round. The results of the first round of elections showed that the DPS candidate and the then president of Montenegro had the most votes, but he had to go to the second round with the PES candidate. It was somewhat of a surprise because many expected that the pro-Serbian Democratic Front (DF) candidate would go to the second round instead of the PES candidate. Nevertheless, the PES candidate received the support of the DF candidate in the second round, which also determined the result of elections. Finally, a candidate from the PES emerged victorious, garnering 58.9% of the vote.¹¹ Thus, Montenegro got a new president in April 2023.

The new president's victory, backed by the PES has raised questions about the direction of Montenegro's national and international policies. The movement, known for its populist leanings, received significant support from Serbian nationalists, particularly from the DF. This alliance suggested a shift towards greater Serbian influence in Montenegrin politics, a development that could challenge the country's independence and secular character.

Extraordinary parliamentary elections and formation of the 44th government of Montenegro

Nevertheless, what is obvious is that the outcome of presidential elections significantly influenced the result of the later extraordinary parliamentary elections, which were called following the dissolution of parliament.¹² Thus, parliamentary elections reflected ongoing political tensions and the complex maneuvering of parties in a deeply divided political landscape. These elections were seen by the PES as a chance for gaining more influence, creating potential changes in the power structure. This party, despite its ideological and nationalistic diversity, was perceived as being primarily driven by a quest for power. This ambition raised concerns about potential compromises on national interests, as indicated by the new president's close ties with the Church of Serbia in Montenegro and the prevalence of Serbian flags during victory celebrations. On the other hand, the DPS, traditionally a strong pro-Montenegro party, faced challenges in retaining its voter base, due to the resignation of its

¹¹ State Election Commission of Montenegro, *Final results of the presidential elections* (available at: <https://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/konacni-rezultati-2023.pdf>)

¹² Djukanovic dissolves Parliament (<https://www.cdm.me/english/djukanovic-dissolves-parliament/>)

long-standing leader. The political scene certainly lacked a pro-Montenegrin corps that was not burdened with scandals and corruption, but such parties were formed only after the elections. Montenegro was at a crossroads, with its political future influenced by internal dynamics and external pressures. The electorate, especially those supporting sovereignist ideals, found itself in a challenging position, with the need for strong leadership and clear foreign support. All this was missing, which was also reflected in the result of the extraordinary parliamentary elections.

The result of the extraordinary parliamentary¹³ elections showed that the coalition around PES emerged with the largest vote share (25.5%) but insufficient for easy government formation, which indicated upcoming negotiations and compromises. The DPS maintained a significant presence (23.2%), contrary to predictions of its sharp decline. The election results also showed underperformance by the Democrats and Citizens' Movement URA and a decrease in support for pro-Serbian parties. Minority parties gained substantial representation, with the Bosnian Party achieving notable success. Hence, the election results indicated a fragmented political scenario, where no single party has a decisive mandate. This fragmentation meant that a government could not be formed without multiple parties with diverse ideologies, raising immediate concerns about its stability. Furthermore, the experience was that foreign influences on government formation could not be overlooked. Furthermore, a notable aspect of the elections was the low voter turnout of just over 56%,¹⁴ which was significantly lower than previous elections. This decrease had suggested a growing disillusionment among the electorate with the ongoing political and social divisions, as well as the negative impact of various controversies, including allegations of financial misconduct and security threats. Hence, the extraordinary parliamentary elections in Montenegro have led to a new distribution of parliamentary seats but have not resolved the underlying political instability. The challenges in forming a stable government, marked by potential compromises and narrow party interests, reflected the electorate's resignation and lack of confidence in the political system. The need for unreserved commitment to reforms and political stability remained critical in this period of uncertainty.

¹³State Election Commission, Provisional Results for the Election of Deputies to the Parliament of Montenegro (available at: <https://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/final-PRIVREMENI-REZULTATI-2023.pdf>)

¹⁴ Ibid.

It was obvious that the possibility of forming a stable government was challenging. PES's stated unwillingness to negotiate with GP URA and DPS, which narrowed its options. A coalition between PES and DPS, while potentially more stable, seemed unlikely due to their differing stances and some of the PES's staff close ties with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The government in the technical mandate had the greatest benefit from the prolonged process of forming a new government, more precisely the then Prime Minister from URA who arbitrarily continued to make decisions related to new staffing in key positions in state institutions. In this way, the government which worked in a technical mandate for more than a year did not act in line with national interests. Montenegro desperately needed a stable government, but the entire period from the election to the formation of the government continued in conditions of political and social turmoil.

The initial negotiations for government formation were held in July. They proved complexity, reflecting a political landscape driven more by strategic bargaining than national interests. They also highlighted the concerns about moral principles in the process. PES had outlined 10 principles for government formation¹⁵, which emphasized values like respect for Montenegro's independence, democratic processes, and EU integration. These principles also included combating organized crime and corruption and promoting social cohesion and economic stability. While these principles appeared ideal for a country aspiring EU membership and grappling with political and social issues, skepticism arised regarding the sincerity of the parties involved. The same parties have previously compromised these principles, questioning the sovereignty and independence of Montenegro, and have shown tendencies towards nationalism and religious bias. This raised the questions the sincerity of politicians in upholding ethical and national values.

Namely, PES was initially engaged in talks with minority and radical pro-Serbian parties, notably excluding URA and DPS.¹⁶ Although the negations varied later, it was these first talks that showed the true intention of PES - to introduce nationalistic pro-Serbian parties into the government, and to use minority parties as a cover. This was later achieved with the

¹⁵ "These are Spajić's 10 principles for forming a new government" (<https://www.cdm.me/politika/ovo-je-10-principa-spajica-za-formiranje-nove-vlade/>)

¹⁶ "Spajić: There are NO negotiations with DPS and Ura, we are OPEN for talks with ZBCG" (<https://kolektiv.me/225900/spajic-sa-dps-i-urom-nema-pregovora-otvoreni-smo-za-razgovor-sa-zbcg>)

participation of the Albanian minority parties and the resignation of the Bosnian Party. The involvement of PES with parties known for spreading religious and national hatred, especially against the Islamic community and certain national groups, further complicated the situation. Their past actions suggested a departure from EU integration and an inclination towards populist measures that threatened financial stability. Hence, there was a visible disconnect between the proclaimed principles and the real intentions of the politicians involved. Speculations about the distribution of ministries and the potential inclusion of radical pro-Serbian parties indicated a government formation driven by political machinations rather than genuine commitment to national interests. The negotiation process, thus, seemed to be less about upholding these principles and more about power distribution within the government.

These developments prolonged Montenegro's cycle of political instability and reform stagnation that lasted during past three years and raised concerns about Montenegro's status as a functional, independent state. Hopes for a swift government formation in Montenegro were dashed as the Prime Ministerial candidate struggled to gain necessary support, amidst debates over the government's breadth. Meanwhile, internal political divisions within the PES party (particularly between the new President of Montenegro and the Prime Ministerial candidate), hindered consensus-building and effective governance.

However, despite various combinations, after several months of negotiations, the mandate holder for the composition of the government succumbed to various internal and external pressures, which resulted in decisions that were harmful to the national interests of Montenegro and its security. Namely, at the end of October, Montenegro elected a president of the Parliament from a radical pro-Serbian party. It was followed by the formation of the 44th Government led by the Prime Minister from PES. The election of a pro-Serbian ideologue as the Parliament's president poses a direct threat to Montenegro's sovereignty and security, especially given his anti-NATO stance and alignment with Serbian and Russian interests. This raised significant concerns in the region and beyond, with various media outlets labeling him as a pro-Russian figure and a symbol of internal divisions within Montenegro. In addition, newly elected government, dominated by parties with ties to the Serbian Church, shows a worrying trend. This includes incidents where the state prosecutor's office, seemingly influenced by the Church, has acted against intellectuals who criticized this religious institution.

Additionally, the government's composition suggests a departure from Montenegrin national interests, with key positions being filled by pro-Serbian parties. These events indicate a shift away from European integration and raise concerns about Montenegro's sovereignty, especially in light of interference by neighboring states.

Backtracking in the European integration of Montenegro

All these processes have posed significant challenges to the country's path towards European integration and overall political stability. The jeopardy of Montenegro's European integration was also confirmed through the annual report of the European Commission (EC) on the country's progress - "Montenegro 2023 Report".¹⁷ This report revealed a lack of genuine commitment from Montenegro's government, with the administration significantly diverting the country from its EU integration path, resulting in Montenegro becoming one of the Western Balkans' most unstable countries. It scrutinized Montenegro's progress in 2023. The report particularly emphasized failings in judicial reform and presented overall discouraging evaluations in other areas. It harshly criticized Montenegro's internal policies, suggesting they are intentionally destabilizing the country's EU integration path. It highlighted a deep institutional crisis within the Montenegrin judiciary, citing poor governance, corruption, and failure to implement reform strategies. The report accused the judiciary of political subservience and called for urgent measures against political influence. The EC criticized the Judicial Council and the Prosecutorial Council for lack of proactivity and transparency. It also mentions the Parliament's failure to elect new Judicial Council members and the controversial extension of the Acting Supreme State Prosecutor's mandate. The report urges swift legal reforms and better material support for judicial institutions. In addition, report noted that political tensions, institutional crises, and slow reforms have led to systemic blockages, impeding Montenegro's EU path. It called for effective political dialogue and stronger parliamentary oversight to stabilize the government. While commending Montenegro's alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy, the report questioned the government's focus on national interests, especially regarding the population census.

¹⁷ European Commission (2023) Montenegro 2023 Report (available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_694%20Montenegro%20report.pdf)

The report underscored the pressing need for Montenegro's new executive and legislative authorities to prioritize reforms in line with the EU agenda. It serves as a roadmap for Montenegro's European integration, emphasizing the urgency of subordinating party interests to national objectives. The "Montenegro 2023 Report" painted a stark picture of Montenegro's challenges on its EU integration journey. It underscored the necessity for comprehensive reforms, and called for a reevaluation of national priorities and an unwavering commitment to democratic processes and EU standards. Montenegro's response to these challenges will be crucial for its stability and success in the international arena.

External influence on internal issues

External influences, particularly from Serbia, are seen as contributing to Montenegro's political crisis. This involvement is part of Serbia's broader regional ambitions and is believed to be causing additional instability in Montenegro. Beyond their involvement in the election process and government structure, the population census in Montenegro was of particular interest to Serbian leaders.¹⁸ This is because its results should have implications for national identity and political affiliations. The debate surrounding it added to the situation's complexity. There are still serious concerns about potential manipulations of the collected data, and some media outlets have reported the involvement of Serbian agents in controlling the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT). This institution will provide data on population census (including data on ethnicity, language and religion) in 2024. This is sure to have an ensuing impact on Montenegro's politics.

Besides Serbia, international interest in Montenegro's political events was reflected through international pressures, especially from NATO countries and the USA, against including anti-Western parties in the government.¹⁹ This external involvement highlights Montenegro's strategic importance in regional politics. The response of the USA and EU to political and social developments in Montenegro has been complex. While they have expressed

¹⁸ "Vučić: I am interested in the results of the Census in Montenegro" (<https://redportal.rs/balkan/15325/vucic-zainteresovan-sam-za-rezultate-popisa-u-crnoj-gori>)

¹⁹ "Escobar: Avoid introducing an anti-Western party into the Montenegrin government" (<https://www.cdm.me/politika/eskobar-izbjeci-da-se-u-crnogorsku-vladu-uvode-antizapadna-stranka/>)

concern regarding the election of the president of parliament²⁰, there has been skepticism about the sincerity of their intentions. The role of external powers, particularly the USA, in this political transition and the result of the elections has also been a point of discussion. Concerns have been raised about the U.S. supporting a tripartite division of regional influence in the Balkans, favoring Serbia, Albania, and Croatia.²¹ This approach could potentially undermine smaller states like Montenegro. The U.S.'s support for the "Open Balkans" initiative, endorsed by the new president, further complicated the situation. Critics argued that while this initiative appeared economic on the surface, it had political underpinnings that did not align with Montenegro's interests.

Conclusion

The political landscape of Montenegro in 2023 has been characterized by significant instability and manipulation by political actors. The current political scene in Montenegro mirrors a broader political and societal crisis, characterized by corruption and a pursuit of power and privilege at the expense of ethical governance. The presidential elections as well as other events in 2023 largely confirmed that. The negotiations on government formation revealed a political culture where political and ruling positions are sought not for public service but for personal gain and party interests. The political scene of Montenegro, despite the formation of a new government, requires significantly greater stability, and for that a clear commitment to reforms and responsible leadership is needed. However, the inherited patterns of behavior of Montenegrin politicians who often tend to forget about national and general social interests do not give too much hope that something will radically improve in 2024.

²⁰ US Embassy: We call for caution, we are concerned about parties that can hinder the progress of Montenegro (<https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/ambasada-sad-pozivamo-na-oprez-zabrinuti-smo-zbog-stranaka-koje-mogu-sprijeciti-napredak-crne-gore>)

²¹ Janusz Bugajski's Washington View: Dividing Western Balkans into Spheres of Influence (<https://istraga.ba/janusz-bugajskis-washington-view-dividing-western-balkans-into-spheres-of-influence/>)