



Weekly Briefing

Montenegro political briefing:
Political and social challenges of Montenegro in 2024
Vojin Golubovic


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Political and social challenges of Montenegro in 2024

Summary

The political and social situation in Montenegro will be dynamic during 2024 due to numerous political, economic and social divisions, pressures and inherited problems. This year could also be the year of intra-party divisions, or consolidation in the largest parties, whether in power or opposition. However, the continuation of social pressures and strikes due to unfulfilled promises, as well as financial difficulties in servicing the extravagant budget, are expected. It could greatly destabilize the work of the government. In addition to internal actors, the European Union could play a significant role in future events on the political scene, which under the motto of Montenegro's progress towards the EU could produce new instability in Montenegrin society, dominating personalities and radical parties that could thus gain legitimacy for a larger share in power. The continuation of Serbian influence could gain momentum, especially after the results of the population census, which was conducted at the end of 2023 in an extremely controversial manner, are published.

Introduction

Montenegro, as a small Balkan country with ethnic, political and social differences, entered a dynamic and unstable period characterized by political transformation during the previous years. It is expected that such development will continue in 2024. A look at the political scene of this country reveals a series of challenges related to internal political and social dynamics, but also international relations and integration. The key response to these challenges will depend on the political elite, but also on the overall capacity of Montenegrin society to successfully overcome them.

Key domestic challenges in 2024

Although there should not be significant elections in Montenegro at any level in 2024, this does not mean that it will be peaceful in the political field. Numerous challenges await the

new government, and the announced reconstruction at the end of the year will only burden its work and reduce the focus on solving real problems. The government led by the Europe Now Movement (PES) ignored the calls from the West. During 2023, the president of the radical pro-Serbian party New Serbian Democracy (NSD) was appointed as the President of the Parliament. This appointment indicated the dependence of the PES on the support of those political actors who years ago denied the Montenegrin state, nation and language. In addition, a reconstruction of the government is planned during the year, which could include representatives of such radical parties. Such developments would raise questions about the future political orientation of Montenegro, especially in light of its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Also, the new government will almost certainly face economic difficulties, especially regarding the 2024 budget. Although the Government claimed that the budget is sustainable and that it focuses on the most vulnerable categories of the population, the very assumptions of the budget seem poorly set. Promises to increase the minimum pensions have already caused dissatisfaction among other pensioners who receive pensions above the minimum amount because no increase is foreseen for them. Additionally, additional concerns exist regarding the financing of these increases and their impact on the state pension fund. On the other hand, numerous strikes have already been announced.¹ For example, the community of educators is demanding an increase in salaries that the previous government promised them in a populist manner. Strikes have also been announced by the employees in public administration and the judiciary who will radicalize protests if their demands for increased wages are not met. Such a picture could become the rule and not the exception during the 2024. Potentially united strikes of different workers could lead to a complete collapse in the functioning of various elements of the system. Such a scenario would put a lot of pressure on the government, and the power of the PES would be shaken at a rate no less than the skyrocketing popularity that brought them to power.

Economic challenges will be joined by the need to increase state revenues and/or decrease expenses. The existing economic policy and government plans are more of a wish list than a realistic assessment of possibilities. Therefore, the feasibility of these plans in practice is questionable. There is a danger that without the stimulation of economic growth and the rationalization of the state sector, all increases in expenditures will be paid in a way that could

¹Rakočević: We are preparing more radical moves, they are not aware of the risks they are taking; Božović: Next week, the decision to go on strike for educators (<https://www.cdm.me/ekonomija/danas-prottest-sindikata-uprave-i-pravosuda-ispred-vlade/>)

be painful for Montenegro as early as 2024. Economic populism will certainly continue in 2024, and the consequence of that could be an additional race between the parties in proposing as many unrealizable promises as possible. Such a policy could lead to the absence of any strategic view on solving the accumulated problems, and the current political elite has already shown that they are inclined to design the program they promised on the fly, such as the "Europe Now 2" program, which is still unknown to the public in its entirety. , but who ensured victory in the previous elections. Therefore, the absence of real political responsibility and potential lack of interest in long-term and complex reforms during 2024 could represent an additional problem for the country's economic progress.

Hence, the economy of Montenegro and the expectations of citizens from their leaders will play a significant role in the political discourse. Citizens are used to looking for answers to economic challenges, including high inflation, unemployment and living standards. The government will have to balance between short-term economic measures and long-term strategies for sustainable development, while simultaneously dealing with political pressures and citizen dissatisfaction.

Also, it will be very important for Montenegro to return to the essential commitment to the European integration process. During 2024, Montenegro will certainly face further challenges in terms of judicial reform and standardization of the legal system, which are key requirements of the EU. This process will not be easy, especially considering the complexity of internal political developments and the need for comprehensive reforms. Montenegro will have to demonstrate concrete steps in the fight against corruption and strengthening the rule of law, which is essential for progress towards EU membership. However, it is not clear to what extent the new political leadership will be dedicated to the real national interests of Montenegro. Experience so far shows that there is a need for a clearer vision and strategy. Montenegro will face a series of internal challenges, and in addition to the reform of the judiciary, there will also be relations with the opposition, and personnel issues. The current prime minister is often criticized for his approach focused on solving immediate problems or postponing them, instead of focusing on long-term political initiatives. In 2024, success in managing these challenges will be critical to the country's stability and progress.

Political instability and uncertainty on the internal level can be deepened by significant tensions and disagreements within the leading political forces in Montenegro, especially between the leaders within the PES. Earlier disagreements could culminate in 2024. They

certainly point to deep political polarization and uncertainty in the future of the party and its politics. Therefore, PES will certainly be under the influence of intra-party conflicts, negotiation pressures from other parties in the government, but also expectations from international actors.. On the other hand, the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), will be occupied by intra-party elections, and it is possible that some of the disaffected members will split off and form a new party. Certainly, those elections are necessary for the sake of intra-party consolidation, but it is difficult to expect that during 2024 the party will significantly free itself from the ballast of old cadres who are connected to numerous affairs. In any case, the opposition parties do not show that during 2024 they could more significantly influence the change of negative events on the Montenegrin political and social scene with their capacities. It seems that excessive emphasis on internal party leadership and not on Montenegro will result in "lukewarm" opposition responses to negative phenomena such as the growth of ethnic divisions, the rise of fascism, clericalization, etc.

Processes of desecularization represent a serious threat to the future of Montenegrin society. Therefore, critical thinking and responsible response will be key in preserving civic values and the secular character of Montenegro in 2024. However, it seems that the critical mass for such a response is currently missing on the political scene. In addition, to these challenges, relations with the NGO sector and dealing with the sensitive topics of gender issues, violence, war crimes, etc. will remain a source of social tension. In 2024, the government will need to take a more sensitive and inclusive approach in addressing these issues, promoting dialogue and understanding among different communities.

External impact on political scene in Montenegro in 2024

The political situation in Montenegro in 2024 will be also a complex interplay of regional dynamics, international influences, and internal strife. Montenegrin political scene can expect the continuation of Serbian influence in 2024. In the last few years, Montenegro has been facing challenges that threaten its fundamental principles of secularity and civil society. Defined by the constitution as a civil and secular state, which implies a clear separation of religious and public institutions, Montenegro is experiencing an increasingly intense involvement of the religious institutions in the political and social life of Montenegro. Hence, in 2024, Montenegro would probably face the same problem which manifests itself through the support of the Church

of Serbia, which in previous years served as a channel for the spread of the influences which threatens the sovereignty and integrity of Montenegro. This religious institution, which is recognized as one of the main bearers of Russian and Serbian interests in the region (according to European institutions²), will probably continue its role in promoting Serbian nationalism and destabilizing Montenegro. It is expected that such influence will intensify in 2024 after the publication of the results of the census, which was conducted with a significant influence of pro-Serbian parties on the entire process. Therefore, one can expect problematic and questionable data that would point to a significant increase of members of Serbian nationality and a decrease of members of Montenegrin nationality. This could be used as a basis for further demands that would destabilize Montenegro, such as demands for the introduction of the Serbian language as an official language, or even the Serbian people as a constituent people in Montenegro. Such demands are already slowly being expressed by the Speaker of the Montenegrin parliament³. In achieving this goal, help, both financial and logistical, can be expected from Serbia, the media that recklessly and unscrupulously promote the idea of a "Serbian world" as well as from clerical circles loyal to Serbian interests. Such demands could lead Montenegro to further divisions and regionalization of the country in the future, as exists, for example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Montenegro is losing its civic capacity to resist such influences, to which foreign diplomats have significantly contributed. It seems that Montenegro is in a situation where the Western powers have managed to install a government in Montenegro that is mostly obedient and without real integrity, which leads to the marginalization of political actors with authentic integrity. In addition, the recent interactions among key political figures, both domestic and international, indicate a troubling trajectory that may affect Montenegro's aspirations towards EU integration. Some recent developments imply that EU started to use so-called "politics of tolerance" towards radical pro-Serbian and pro-Russian stances in Montenegro.⁴ This apparent tolerance, if not covert support to radical pro-Serbian parties, is not only evident in internal politics but also reflects in the interactions with European diplomats. Recent meeting between

² European Commission, Montenegro 2023 Report (https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e09b27af-427a-440b-a47a-ed5254aec169_en?filename=SWD_2023_694%20Montenegro%20report.pdf)

³ Mandić: If the Serbian language is the majority after the census, it should be official (https://rtnk.me/politika/mandic-srpski-jezik-ako-nakon-popisa-bude-vecinski-da-bude-sluzbeni/#google_vignette)

⁴ Vlahović asks Popa: Does the meeting with Mandić represent a change in the EU's attitude towards ZBCG (<https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/vlahovic-pita-popu-da-li-susret-sa-mandicem-predstavlja-promjenu-stava-eu-prema-zbcg>)

EU Delegation head in Montenegro and President of the Montenegrin Parliament confirms previous statement. This is obvious turnaround, having in mind previous negative attitude towards participation of this far-right nationalistic party in government. Moreover, presence of a Serbian flag – a symbol resonating more with Serbian nationalism than Montenegrin statehood – at this meeting signals a concerning disregard for Montenegrin national identity and sovereignty.⁵

Hence, the question is whether the international diplomacy in 2024 will support even those who deny Montenegrin nation, language and who those who belittle Montenegrin national symbols and independence? The EU's approach towards Montenegro, especially after the June 2023 extraordinary elections, has been somewhat contradictory. While there is a call for reform and progression towards EU standards, there is also a perceptible hesitancy to confront radical pro-Serbian elements within the Montenegrin political spectrum. This ambiguity is evident in the EU's interactions with figures like President of Montenegrin Parliament. Such meetings with controversial persons seem to legitimize their positions.

Moreover, the internal political dynamics of Montenegro, particularly within the PES, reveal ideological alignments that are uncomfortably close to those espoused by danger pro-Serbian and pro-Russian factions. The lack of a decisive political will, especially in addressing key issues pertinent to EU integration, further exacerbates this situation. All this might have implications for EU integration. Despite declarative support to the EU integration process, the behaviour of EU delegation in Montenegro, i.e. its tacit support for those who deny Montenegro significantly diminishes the nation's chances for rapid EU accession. Such support can produce new political divisions and intolerance, or even reduce the willingness to join EU among those citizens who openly supported EU accession. Despite optimistic rhetoric from EU side about reforms and “open doors”, the reality is different, and it implies a complex internal situation coupled with the EU's reluctance to make decisive moves that would genuinely bring Montenegro closer to EU membership. This inertia reflects not only in Montenegro's domestic politics but also in the varied and often ineffective EU policy towards Montenegro and Western Balkan countries in general. The tolerance of dangerous political stances and the lack of decisive EU engagement could be detrimental to Montenegro's European aspirations. Unless there is a significant shift in both domestic and international approaches, Montenegro's path to

⁵ During meeting with Ambassador Popa, Andrija Mandić violated law, undermined constitutional order and fueled divisions in Montenegro (<https://www.cdm.me/english/during-meeting-with-ambassador-popa-andrija-mandic-violated-law-undermined-constitutional-order-and-fueled-divisions-in-montenegro/>)

real democracy, rule of law and EU membership could remain fraught with challenges and uncertainties. The situation calls for a more assertive European policy and a stronger commitment to democratic values and national sovereignty within Montenegro's political framework.

In addition to this, the potential European turn on elections for European Parliament could head the Montenegrin political developments in concerning direction in 2024. This primarily refers to the potential rise of far-right parties in Europe. The upcoming EU parliamentary elections could be pivotal for Montenegro. These elections will not only shape the EU's future direction but also significantly influence Montenegro's European integration process. If far-right parties gain substantial seats, it could alter the EU's stance on enlargement and integration, affecting Montenegro's aspiration to join the union. The popularity of these parties, characterized by nationalist, anti-immigrant, and often Eurosceptic views, poses a challenge to the stability and democratic processes in negotiation countries, including Montenegro. The growth of the power of such parties can also lead to an undisguised demonstration of the power of similar parties in Montenegro, which for now, at least declaratively, recognize the authority of the European Union and stand for European integration. Hence, the increasing popularity of far-right parties across Europe could have a resonating impact on Montenegro. These parties' stances on various issues, ranging from immigration to national sovereignty, could influence public opinion and political discourse in Montenegro as well. The rise of such ideologies can stir nationalist sentiments, and potentially destabilize the already delicate ethnic and political situation. Montenegro, with its own complex political dynamics, could be very vulnerable to these developments and face additional internal political challenges based on national and ethnic divisions.

The Prime Minister's intention to convince Western partners of the necessity of including the parties of the former DF in the government poses a risk of political instability in 2024. His tactics, which include the gradual introduction of ministers from radical pro-Serbian parties into the Government, could be seen as an attempt to buy time and consolidate the position until key elections in the US and the European Parliament. This, however, opens up space for political manipulation and extremism, given the radical tendencies of the Speaker of the Parliament and the members of his extreme coalition who want to join the government. If that happens, those members will probably insist on the change in the country's constitution. The Prime Minister will probably try to soften the public's resistance to the introduction of such personnel into the

government. It is expected that for this purpose, in addition to the populist approach to social benefits and wage growth, he will also use the long-awaited filling of positions in the judiciary and the election of the supreme state prosecutor in 2024. Hence, the political situation in Montenegro will continue to be complicated in 2024 by the perception that civic-minded Montenegrins will remain marginalized. This creates the risk of political persecution with the support of controversial nationalist media.

Conclusion

In 2024, the political scene of Montenegro will be riddled with complex challenges of a different nature - from regional relations and European integration to internal political and social challenges. After the establishment of a new government, Montenegro is at a crossroads. The ability to respond to these challenges in 2024, while preserving democratic principles and promoting economic and social development, could also determine the fate of Montenegro in the coming years.

The political and economic situation in Montenegro in 2024 will look challenging, with potential internal tensions and uncertainties in relations with the international community. Politics in Montenegro in 2024 is entering a turbulent period, with pronounced risks of political manipulation and the introduction of extreme elements into power. The main actor of this dynamic will certainly be the new Prime Minister, whose activities regarding the integration of the former DF into the government cause concern among the Montenegrin public.

Relations with Serbia will remain a key factor in Montenegro's relations with the region. Hence, in 2024, Montenegro will have to deal with this influence, balancing between preserving good neighborly relations and the need to affirm its independence and sovereignty.. In light of these circumstances, this year could be crucial in determining the future direction of Montenegro, between the danger of extreme political manipulations and the opportunity for stabilization and progress based on European values.