



Weekly Briefing

Montenegro political briefing:
**Challenges to stability in Montenegro: Political fragmentation and
external influences**
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Challenges to stability in Montenegro: Political fragmentation and external influences

Summary

Although the government is established recently, the political landscape in Montenegro is again experiencing increased instability. Main reasons for such a situation are internal power struggles within the strongest ruling party Movement Europe Now (PES), but also struggle within entire ruling coalition, particularly between the PES and the Democrats. These disputes, reflect deep-seated political interests that contribute to governmental instability. The internal conflict is not just about individual positions but indicates a broader battle for party influence. It certainly exacerbates divisions and undermines the effectiveness of governance in Montenegro. In addition, external influence on such developments cannot be neglected.

Introduction

The political scene in Montenegro was shaken again by the withdrawal of the current Montenegrin president from PES where he was vice-president.¹ The PES announced that it was good that he left party, assessing that his intentions were to obstruct the work of the Government and the party.² Although it was known that there were disagreements between him and the current Prime Minister who is from the same party, this certainly shook the PES. In addition, the Minister of Justice was also expelled from the party³, which further brought instability not only in the party but also in the government itself. In addition, the struggle for control of the security sector continues⁴ where main role is played by Democrats.

¹ Milatović: I am resigning from all positions in the Europe Now Movement (<https://www.cdm.me/politika/milatovic-dajem-ostavku-na-sve-funkcije-u-pes-u/>)

² PES on Milatović's resignation: It is good that relations are cleared up, maybe the obstructions will stop (<https://standard.co.me/politika/pes-o-ostavci-milatovica-dobro-je-da-se-odnosi-rasciste-mozda-opstrukcije-prestanu>)

³ The Minister of Justice of Montenegro excluded from the "Europe Now Movement" (<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/andrej-milovic-pokret-evropa-sad-isključenje-iz-stranke/32834642.html>)

⁴ "A great struggle in the majority for supremacy in the security sector" (<https://rtnk.me/politika/velika-borba-u-vecini-za-prevlast-u-bezbjednosnom-sektoru/>)

What is happening with PES?

It was noticeable during recent months that the unfolding political dynamics within PES reveals internal conflict, mainly between current Prime Minister (PM) and President of Montenegro, i.e. leadership challenges that signify a broader trend of political fragmentation. The resignation of one of key figures, party's vice president (indicates a deeper rift within the party, potentially affecting its unity and effectiveness. These internal issues are part of a broader trend of political fragmentation, which complicates the party's ability to present a unified policy platform and participate effectively in governance. Hence, it seems that this resignation is not merely a personal decision but signals divisions within party, which affects its unity and the broader political scene. This is since this event might prompt a reconfiguration of political alliances and impact the process of government formation.

In addition, this move could be seen as strategic withdrawal of resigned to position himself favourably for future electoral contests, capitalizing on his reconciliatory presidential image to appeal to PES members, other parties, and voters alike.⁵ This resignation also signals a shift in the centre of political disagreements. These disagreements existed previously between PES, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), and the Democratic Front (DF), while now they are focusing on a PM-President of Montenegro dichotomy. This development is expected to cause significant changes within PES, influencing other members' support for the government and potentially leading to a reconfiguration of the political scene and government structure. The timing of this resignation suggests a deliberate distancing of Montenegrin President from the current socio-political milieu he helped shape, challenging the narrative around his dedication to democratization and Europeanization. The reasons behind his departure could be numerous. They could be related to government reconstruction hesitations, potential Bosniak Party (BS) government inclusion, or some personal interests motivated by the greed for more power. No matter what reason is, such a situation highlights the complex political dynamics.

Hence this resignation is both surprising and expected, reflecting the unpredictable nature of high-level politics, especially in times of political instability. This move signifies a pivotal moment, unravelling the level of political stability newly established by the ruling majority.

⁵ Milatović starts to establish a party, expects cooperation with Bečić, Joković and Abazović, hopes for support from ZBCG (<https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/milatovic-krece-u-osnivanje-partije-ocekuje-saradnju-sa-becicem-jokovicem-i-abazovicem-nada-se-podrsci-iz-zbcg>)

Various recent events and behaviour implied that this would happen, from involvement of Montenegrin President in the process of teachers' strike, perceived as meddling in government affairs, and allegations linking him to nepotism. Additionally, his brother's recent business success in Serbia has drawn media attention⁶, complicating his political image. Hence, this suggests a pre-emptive resignation to avoid expulsion, in conditions of internal divisions and the potential for further fragmentation. On the other side, this situation presents a significant opportunity for the opposition leaders to demonstrate a commitment to state interests and position themselves as guarantors of political stability.

Restructure of government as factor contributing to instability

Additional factor that causes political instability even within PES and between PES and Democrats is the potential BS government participation. The announced reconstruction of the government might include this party as well.⁷ The potential integration of the BS into government, supported by former Democratic Front allies, could significantly impact the Montenegrin political scene. This development could lead to a realignment of political forces, influencing government priorities and policy directions, especially in areas concerning ethnic relations, integration policies, and regional cooperation. However, resistance from certain factions underscores the delicate balance of ethnic and political dynamics within Montenegro. The scenarios that unfold could range from a strengthened, more inclusive government that harnesses diverse perspectives for progressive policies to heightened political tensions if the integration process exacerbates existing divisions. This pivotal moment could either pave the way for a more cohesive national policy framework or lead to further polarization, depending on how effectively the BS can navigate its entry into government and the responses from other political subjects. As always in Montenegrin politics, support to such a reconstruction is probably driven by hidden political interest. Extreme Serbian parties officially announced that they support such a move, but at the same time their leader, who is the Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament hosted a president of Bosnian entity Republika Srpska⁸, who

⁶ Standard investigates: Brother of the President of Montenegro, Jakov Milatović, successful businessman in Serbia since 2021 - from gym to road construction (<https://standard.co.me/politika/standard-istrazuje-brat-predsjednika-cg-jakova-milatovica-od-2021-godine-uspjesan-biznismen-u-srbiji-od-teretane-do-gradnje-puteva>)

⁷ "Government reconstruction certain, possible breakthrough" (<https://rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/521295/rekonstrukcija-vlade-izvjesna-moguc-iskorak-.html>)

⁸ For Dodik, the Serbian world is a phenomenal idea, submitted to Mandić a proposal for an agreement on special ties; Mandić: I am honored to have hosted the president of the RS (<https://www.cdm.me/politika/za-dodika->

previously denied genocide in Srebrenica and who promoted the creation of the Serbian world during the visit to Montenegro. It is a move that may lead BS to give up participation in the government, which includes extremist Serbian parties. This is perhaps the hidden intention of the pro-Serbian parties to advocate one thing in public, and implement another in practice. Despite these challenges, BS's participation in government could reshape government's priorities and policies. However, it is obvious that the resistance from certain political parties exist. Beside abovementioned hidden intentions of radical pro-Serbian parties, Democrats as another political entity that is close to Serbian interests is openly against participation of BS in restructured government.⁹ This again reveals the complex interplay of ethnic and political dynamics in government formation.

Irresponsible behaviour of main political actors

All these political games have significantly tarnished Montenegro's international reputation, revealing the duplicity and decay stemming from the coalition agreement that led to the formation of the supposedly stable, officially pro-European 44th Government and parliamentary majority. In addition, many other incidental events support the thesis about only formal commitment to the interests of Montenegro and stability. Instead, malicious intentions of certain political actors are evident. Notable incidents include the participation of former Democratic Front (DF) members in the unconstitutional Day of the Republic of Srpska celebration, highlighting a disregard for Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions. This, alongside other actions such as unauthorized official uses of the Republika Srpska flag by Montenegrin officials, and the absence of government representatives at Kosovo's Independence Day celebration, has strained Montenegro's relations with neighbouring countries. Additionally, actions and statements by certain officials have raised questions about Montenegro's commitment to European integration, especially considering the European Parliament's resolution to sanction the president of Bosnian entity Republika Srpska. These events reflect the absence of Montenegro's foreign ministry's response which was needed. Hence they suggest a troubling endorsement or incapacity to address these developments, further complicating Montenegro's path towards EU membership.

[srpski-svet-fenomenalna-ideja-dostavio-mandicu-predlog-sporazuma-o-specijalnim-vezama-mandic-cast-mi-je-sto-sam-bio-domacin-predsjedniku-rs-a/](https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/politika/demokrate-protiv-ulaska-bosnjacke-stranke-u-vladu-5225225)

⁹ Democrats against the entry of the Bosniak Party into the Government (<https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/politika/demokrate-protiv-ulaska-bosnjacke-stranke-u-vladu-5225225>)

Additionally, the struggle for dominance in the security sector among political parties in Montenegro, particularly between the PES and the Democrats, with the involvement of the Civil Movement URA, reflects hidden political interests causing instability within the government. The Democrats habitually continued to imitate the reforms, and in essence, it is party that, in addition to the fact that its policy is close to Serbian interests, implements the most party recruitment in Montenegro. Therefore, from various aspects, it is important for Democrats to rule the security sector in Montenegro. This can largely explain the chaos in which that sector is found. This internal conflict, highlighted by disputes over appointments and dismissals in the security sector, reveals a broader battle for control rather than serving the public interest, exacerbating divisions within the ruling coalition, and contributing to societal polarization.

These Montenegrin government's actions, or lack of appropriate actions, underscore a neglect of national interests and a pattern of behaviour detrimental to Montenegro's international standing. Key incidents, such as engaging with controversial figures and events, misuse of symbols, and neglecting diplomatic protocols, reflect poorly on the government's commitment to upholding the principles of sovereignty and regional cooperation. These actions not only strain relations with neighbouring countries but also cast doubt on the government's dedication to European integration. Summarily, they reflect a prioritization of narrow political agendas over the broader national goals and European paths.

Protests and strikes also contribute to instability

In Montenegro, a significant educators' strike commenced¹⁰, affecting most primary and secondary schools due to unresolved salary negotiations with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation. This strike placed additional pressure on the government, especially amidst criticisms of Montenegrin President's alleged interference in the Prime Minister's responsibilities.¹¹ The educators' strike in Montenegro, encompassing a significant portion of primary and secondary schools, underscores a profound discontent with the government's handling of their demands for better wages. Namely, president called for the government to engage more responsibly with the educators' union. This was a critical intervention in what could traditionally be seen as the purview of the Prime Minister and his cabinet. Parents

¹⁰ Education union: We will start a strike on Monday; Drašković: If there is an agreement on Sunday, we will give up (<https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/sindikats-prosvjete-u-ponedjeljak-stupamo-u-strajk>)

¹¹ Milatović: The government should be more responsible towards the Education Union (<https://rtnk.me/drustvo/video-milatovic-vlada-da-se-odgovornije-odnosi-prema-sindikatu-prosvjete/>)

expressed frustration over the disruption. Such a situation highlighted a broader discontent with the government's handling of educational and national issues. The situation reflected a deepening crisis within the educational sector, but also increased instability that affects political parties. This situation not only placed additional pressure on the government to resolve the impasse but also illustrated the complexity of political responsibility and the prioritization of national education and economic concerns within Montenegro's governance framework.

External roots of internal political changes?

The reason for internal political instability could be also related to potential external influence. Namely, the entire process of political destabilization could be analysed also from the perspective of Serbian interests in Montenegro. Some media announced the thoughts of some politicians that the Serbian president harbours intentions to derail Montenegro's integration efforts, particularly concerning the European Union.¹² If true, this is perceived as a strategic move to maintain Serbian influence in the region. The rationale behind these alleged intentions could be to ensure Serbia's political and economic interests are safeguarded, even at the expense of Montenegro's European aspirations.

This is exactly what the mentioned visit of the president of the Bosnian entity of Republika Srpska to Montenegro shows. Because the purpose of that visit was to submit a proposal for an agreement on special ties between Republika Srpska and Montenegro, similar to the one that Republika Srpska already has with Serbia. This move was supported by the President of the Parliament of Montenegro, although the details of the agreement were not published. Such agreements supported by a person who, as a representative of the extreme Serbian party in Montenegro, disparaged the state of Montenegro, its national symbols and the Montenegrin language are extremely problematic. Such agreements can be used as a means to undermine the sovereignty of Montenegro, similarly as in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, there is a fear that this agreement would further deepen regional instability, in line with Serbia's strategy to create a "Serbian world". The West, on the other hand, could tolerate this development as part of political-strategic compromises. This is seen as a step according to the institutional involvement of Montenegro in destructive politics, which was demonstrated by ignoring the flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the mentioned visit.

¹² Vuković: Vučić does not want Montenegro in the EU. (<https://kodex.me/clanak/294324/vukovic-vucic-ne-zeli-crnu-goru-u-eu>)

Hence, the thesis that there are intentions of official Serbia to disrupt Montenegro's European integration efforts is probably based on strategic desire of Serbian authorities to maintain dominant influence in the Western Balkans. This strategy includes leveraging political, economic, and cultural ties to assert influence over Montenegro's foreign policy decisions and integration trajectory. The approach to position Serbia as a central player in Balkan politics, potentially at the expense of Montenegro's aspirations towards European Union membership reflects a broader pattern of behaviour by regional powers seeking to assert their influence over neighbouring countries' domestic and foreign policies. Even the mentioned struggles within the PES are seen as a consequence of the Serbian involvement in Montenegrin politics. Namely, a well-known historian from Serbia presented the thesis that the events in the PES, which he called the “collapse of the PES”, were deliberately caused to stop the European path of Montenegro, with the direct role of the President of Serbia, as a catalyst of insecurity in Montenegrin politics. According to this thesis, internal conflicts within PES are the result of personal confrontations without a clear ideological basis and without clear political and value orientations.¹³ This also points to the complex interplay of regional dynamics and integration processes in the Western Balkans.

However, the Western responses to political events in Montenegro are not so loud. Rather, it seems that they reflect geopolitical interests, diplomatic strategies, and the balance between public statements and behind-the-scenes diplomacy. This for instance refers to the silence of European Union (EU) toward the visit of mentioned controversial president of Bosnian entity Republika Srpska and the perceived inconsistency in its diplomatic stance. The Brussels' mild reaction to his dangerous statements on Montenegro as part of Serbian world undermines regional stability. This raises concerns about the EU's commitment to democratic values and the rule of law in the Western Balkans, suggesting a potential compromise of principles for the sake of strategic interests. Hence, it seems that the EU faces challenges in balancing diplomacy, regional stability, and the promotion of democratic standards. However, it has impact on Montenegro as well. The U.S. diplomatic approach is also unclear. It reflects a perceived failure to stabilize the region during recent period. The US diplomatic strategies inadvertently bolstered Serbian's president regional influence, undermining the intentions for democratic

¹³ Beslin: The goal of the dissolution of the PES is to stop the European path of Montenegro (<https://www.antenam.net/politika/316942-beslin-cilj-raspada-pes-a-je-zaustavljanje-evropskog-puta-crne-gore>)

stability and European integration of Montenegro. Therefore, we should not expect that their diplomacy will contribute to the reduction of instability in the coming period.

Future Political Developments

Based on the events presented, it can be concluded that future political developments in Montenegro are likely to be influenced by ongoing political instability, the reconfiguration of party alliances, and the impact of external actors like Serbia. This suggests a cautious approach, recommending that political stakeholders prioritize national interest and sincere dialogue and cooperation to navigate the current uncertainties. This strategy could help Montenegro address its internal divisions and advance its integration efforts.

However, not all these events have to be negative. Namely, they can achieve the exact opposite effect. Attempts by certain political leaders in Montenegro and abroad to destabilize Montenegro and to distance it from the European Union and bring it closer to the "Serbian world" can have the opposite effect. The paradox would be reflected in the fact that the EU usually accelerates negotiations with countries when they recognize the perniciousness of certain policies in those countries that could cause damage to the EU itself. Because the current situation and experience show that political games are uncertain and can have unexpected consequences. Therefore, it would not be surprising to see greater commitment to the EU and confirmation of progress in EU integration in the next report of the European Commission on Montenegro. Hence, what Montenegro should certainly expect is increased external influence, i.e. Serbia's efforts to assert its influence, along with the interests of Western powers in Montenegro's EU and NATO integration. The balance of these external pressures could shape Montenegro's foreign policy and internal reforms in the upcoming months. However, it can be expected that the reconstruction of government will be influenced by these external pressures.

The instability and shifts within parties like PES and the potential inclusion of the BS in the government may lead to new alliances and coalitions. Successful integration of parties like BS could serve as a model for addressing ethnic tensions and promoting political inclusivity. However, the question is whether the government is capable to incorporate diverse ethnic groups and political parties. The most stable government would be the one that include PES (after stabilisation), minority parties, and opposition parties that are truly devoted to

Montenegrin national interests. These changes could either stabilize the political scene or further exacerbate fragmentation. However, this scenario is less expected due to the still negative attitude of majority of PES members towards coalition with such parties. The most unfavourable situation for Montenegro would be a reconstruction of government that would lead to the significant introduction of radical nationalist Serbian parties into it. That is, unfortunately, a very possible scenario, because the question is how capable the current PM is to resist the pressure of such parties. In that case, Montenegro's path towards EU integration would likely encounter obstacles, which would be related to the lack of substantial reforms in governance, rule of law, etc. Hence, the political will of PES and capacity to reduce instability will be a key determinant of progress.

Recent events emphasize the urgent need for political stability in Montenegro to safeguard national interests. The internal power struggles within the PES that culminated in resignation of the party's vice-president (Montenegrin president), as well as struggles within the ruling parties underscore the deep political interests driving governmental instability. These internal conflicts, as well as disputes over the security sector, not only exacerbates divisions within the political actors but also undermines effective governance. It is crucial for political stakeholders to prioritize dialogue and cooperation. Such an approach would not only address the current uncertainties but also pave the way for Montenegro to progress in its integration efforts, thereby aligning more closely with European standards and expectations. However, it seems that Montenegro still lacks the responsible government, and it is far away from the path of stability and progress. The Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament continued to implement a policy that favoured Serbia, endangering regional stability and the internal situation in Montenegro. This policy manifests itself through the neglect of international obligations and the promotion of Serbian nationalism, which is not in accordance with the European path of Montenegro but leads to greater regional instability and internal political tension.