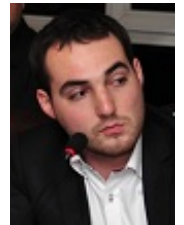


Montenegro parliamentary election: Going beyond the 'NATO vs Russia' dichotomy

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Montenegro votes in parliamentary elections on Sunday 16 October. [Mirko Bošković](#) outlines the main topics of the campaign, recent controversies regarding party funding, and possible future scenarios for Montenegro following the election. Montenegro's invitation to join NATO, which is yet to be ratified by the country's parliament and could cause a geopolitical stir should it not happen, has overshadowed all other issues in international press coverage of the election. However, he argues that there are far more important issues at stake and the temptation to understand this election as a choice between two options must be resisted.



US Secretary Kerry with Montenegrin PM Đukanović. Credits: [US Department of State](#) (public domain)

Are Montenegrin citizens deciding about their NATO membership and making a choice between the West (US / EU) and the East (Russia)? This is the main issue international media covering the country's elections are interested in. Montenegro, however, does not have a two-party system, hence the outcome of the elections cannot entail a Hillary-Trump type of dichotomy. Only twice in its [short history](#) did the country have a stark choice between two options: in 1998, between 'Milo and Momo' (i.e. Milo Đukanović and Momir Bulatović, who led the two factions which split the ruling party into two – the [Democratic Party of Socialists](#) – DPS – and the [Socialist People's Party of Montenegro](#) – SNP – respectively) and in 2006, on the occasion of the referendum over the country's independence. In today's elections, however, Montenegrins are called on to weigh up a much wider spectrum of dilemmas than the dualist 'NATO vs Russia' question.

Montenegro's NATO accession – a closed issue?

Montenegro received an invitation for NATO membership in December 2015. Since then, the ratification process has begun: the invitation needs to be ratified by all the existing member states before it can be discussed by Montenegro's parliament. Montenegro's MPs are therefore expected to decide on whether the country accepts the

invitation to become a member of the alliance. However, this is not the only road to membership.

Some of the opposition parties demand that the decision on membership be taken directly by the citizens via a referendum, while a vote in the parliament is the route NATO expects from Montenegro. For the Alliance, a referendum is the least desirable option, and the reasons are clear: public support for membership is not very high, and the risks of a 'no' vote would be considerable. In case the majority of Montenegro's citizens decided that they are against NATO accession, the Euro-Atlantic integration process and the parallel distancing from Russia's influence that has been pursued for a number of years would be dealt a major blow.

For NATO, the refusal of the invitation to join the alliance would set a decidedly unfavourable precedent. Not because of the strategic importance and influence of a country with a mere 600,000-strong population, but rather because of the fact that Russia is openly opposed to Montenegro's NATO accession, and a Montenegrin 'no' vote would be a victory for Russia in what is now popularly referred to as 'hybrid warfare'. But is this really the key issue: i.e. will this once again be a yes / no question as it was during the referendum on independence ten years ago? My impression is that the choice is not so easy, and that the really important questions are actually the domestic ones: Montenegro's dire economic situation and the rule of law.

The much toughened fight against corruption and organised crime which has been playing out over the past 20 months is mostly an effect of EU and NATO conditionality and of the distancing from the Russian 'business model'. But this fight is also closely linked to the economic situation. Stopping the abuse of public office, the undue seizure of state property and the large-scale tax dodging would greatly improve the stability and the sustainability of Montenegro's budget. A transparent system and strong and independent institutions would favourably influence the attractiveness of Montenegro for foreign investors acting in full respect of the rule of law, with a lower influx of capital of doubtful origin that has been previously making its way to Montenegro through the back door and the front door alike.

Montenegro's most transparent election yet

This election is held in conditions which are previously unseen in Montenegro. The coalition government in power up until the elections goes under the name of 'government of electoral trust', and has a number of ministers from opposition parties whose role was to control the work of the institutions, i.e. to prevent a possible abuse of public funds for electoral ends. Aside from the ministers and the deputy PM, the opposition was also given representatives in local administrations and in public firms, who had the same task of overseeing the processes from the inside.

Laws were improved, and strict punishments with prison sentences were introduced for those found culpable of interfering with free elections. Any infractions are competence of the Special prosecutor for organised crime and corruption. This section of the public prosecution office (which has jailed, among others, the deputy leader of the ruling party DPS – Svetozar Marović) has already received a large number of complaints, and all staff members are on duty during the election day.

The opposition has been controlling the ministries which were considered to be most at risk of misuse before the elections themselves: Interior, Labour and Social issues, Finance and Agriculture – next to the position of Deputy PM. The police forces were headed by an opposition minister who was also involved in controlling the electoral register and in introducing new systems of identification for the elections. And yet, after several months of work and control, the Minister of the Interior Goran Danilović, of the opposition party Demos, has refused to sign the electoral register, stating that it contains too many irregularities. In spite of this, the register was signed by the DPS representative, with the sign-off by the government.

After this experience – which has its initial roots in a [prolongued period of unrest against the ruling powers](#), started in September 2015 – the opposition maintains that they have done as much as they could to control the elections from the inside, and that they were blocked in doing so by the representatives of the ruling party. In spite of not being fully satisfied with the conditions for fair and free elections, the opposition has decided not to boycott them.

Looked at from the outside, the 2016 parliamentary elections are thus being held with the most regular and transparent conditions so far. The leading party DPS has never been exposed to so many detailed checks. This does not mean, however, that the control of the opposition parties within the government has been flawless and entirely successful. It only stands as a reminder of how complex and problematic the electoral cycles are in Montenegro, which was made apparent by the recent '[Snimak scandal](#)', when a recording emerged of DPS officers working out a system of collections of votes based on distributing employment (they estimated that one job could give them four votes). The ruling party strenuously disputes all criticism of being involved in irregularities during the elections, maintaining that all citizens are casting their preference in total freedom. And yet, they accepted to participate in the 'government of electoral trust' together with opposition parties – as, quite clearly, the trust in the electoral process had all but vanished.

The most expensive campaigns so far, with unclear funding sources

According to estimates based on publicly available information, the political parties have spent more than ever on this election. Next to the DPS, a grouping of parties which have invested a large amount of funds in election campaigning is the [Democratic Front \(DF\)](#). The DF have hired the Israeli company Shaviv strategy & campaigns and have introduced a new, unconventional type of communication with the electorate – starting from the imposing and ever-present billboards on the roads suggesting to voters that it is a choice between 'Us or Him' (i.e., Milo Đukanović), to [creative video ads](#).

The question of where the DF get their money from has been much debated, but the answer to it is not known yet. The DPS accuse them of being financed by the Russian tycoons close to Vladimir Putin, with the aim of stopping Montenegro's accession to NATO. The unofficial figures discussed amount to \$4-5m, which the DF has allegedly been given by Russia. The DF avoid answering to these questions directly, but do not hide their stance advocating for the withdrawal of the sanctions against Russia and of Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo as an independence country, while the most influential parties within the grouping are also opposed to NATO membership. DPS' campaign funding has also remained largely unclear so far. It is emblematic of the wider picture that the funding of Montenegro's two most influential parties is a mystery.

Đukanović, the DPS, independence and NATO: alone against all

Having lost their long-term partner SDP last December, the DPS has decided to compete in this election on their own, and to let their leader, Milo Đukanović, be the mouthpiece of the whole campaign. Something similar was happening in previous electoral cycles, but for the first time the campaign was based in such measure not only on the personality and on the skills of Đukanović himself, who remains the most influential and the most powerful figure in the country.

In his appearances, Đukanović sent a message characterising these elections as a test for the independence of Montenegro, for the safeguarding of its identity and sovereignty, which is the [same topic that was debated at the referendum held ten years ago](#).

The public image of the ruling party has been considerably affected by the numerous scandals and accusations of corruption, and especially by the statement given by Svetozar Marović – until recently the party's n.2 figure – in tribunal, where he confessed to having been the head of an organised crime group which has been misusing public office over several years, by consciously damaging Montenegro's budget and seizing property belonging to its citizens. Aside from Marović, a number of other DPS officers are under investigation by the Special prosecution for organised crime.

Because of all this, it seems that the DPS are currently in the hardest position since the early 2000s, and that the opposition has a good chance of seizing power. However, this is not quite the case. The DPS state that the jailing of Marović is actually a proof showing that they are currently building a system in which there are no 'untouchables', not even those occupying high positions within their own party. As the argument goes, their fight against corruption

is therefore yielding good results.

The DPS are also drawing their strength from a foreign affairs perspective. Next to billing themselves as the only ones able to safeguard the state's sovereignty, the DPS send a message to the voters that they are the only ones able to grant the continuation of Montenegro's accession to NATO and the European Union. With slow, but clear reforms and the open distancing from Russia (which had been the most influential foreign player in Montenegro in the period 2004-2009), the DPS are showing to the domestic and the international audience that they have the capacity to continue leading Montenegro towards the West.

Who will be Montenegro's next PM?

Regardless of the result of the elections, it is not realistic to expect that a government will be formed soon. If the DPS do not manage to gather enough votes to form a comfortable majority with the parties representing the ethnic minorities (Bosniaks, Albanians and Croats), who are DPS' usual allies, the formation of the government could become very complex.

One possible outcome is that the 'pro-Western' forces might agree to form a government which will finalise the NATO accession process and continue on the EU integration path. This government would be very similar to the 'Government of electoral trust' which was in power before the elections.

As things stand, the biggest obstacle to the realisation of this scenario is the agreement which was signed by the opposition parties – which have committed themselves not to agree, under any circumstances, to forming a government with the DPS. On the other hand, another obstacle for government formation *without* the DPS is that some opposition parties have incompatible stances on foreign policy issues, such as NATO, the recognition of Kosovo and the sanctions against Russia. The hardest line is represented by the DF, which is at the same time the strongest opposition party, likely to scoop a considerable share of the vote. It is yet unclear how a compromise on these issues could be found between the DF and pro-Western parties such as SDP and the movement URA.

Although the incoherence of the opposition's stances on foreign policy plays in the DPS' favour, their position is not much easier. A possible agreement with a part of the pro-Western opposition forces would probably be conditioned by a stronger fight against corruption, the freeing of the institutions of political influence, and the stopping of certain privatisation deals which are either in course or about to be started. This means that the possible opposition partners would be able to claw back a good amount of power from the party that has been continuously ruling over Montenegro from the end of the second world war (up until 1991 the party was called the [League of Communists of Montenegro](#), and in June 1991 its name was changed to the Democratic Party of Socialists – DPS).

Over the last few months there has been talk of Milo Đukanović's withdrawal from politics, but as the date of the elections was approaching, this story faded away. The reason is clear: without their leader, the DPS would most likely lose the bulk of the electorate's support, so it would become possible to talk about his retirement only after the elections. Both the DPS and the opposition parties will have a big role to play in the negotiations, unless the DPS manage to win with a considerable majority.

The country's economic situation is very worrying: strikes by unhappy citizens or workers of failed state enterprises are an everyday occurrence. Autumn 2015 was marked by [anti-government protests](#) which ended in street unrests – a reminder that a slender majority would not be able to guarantee stability to Montenegro.

A further challenge will be maintaining peace and order in the country after the announcement of the results. If the difference in the number of preferences cast will not be convincing, it cannot be excluded that certain political forces might declare the elections 'stolen' and call citizens onto the streets. Montenegro does not have a track record of protests ending peacefully, nor has it so far ever been possible to actually protect the 'electoral will' in this way. Quite on the contrary, such demonstrations have usually ended up with the strengthening of the government in power, seen as a stronghold against the 'destructive opposition'.

In the short term, unrest and instability could benefit a certain number of political forces from the opposition, and from the ruling powers as well. In the long run, they would result in an irreparable damage to Montenegro and its citizens.

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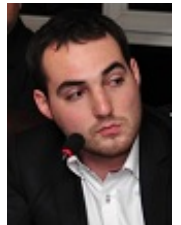
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