



# MONTENEGRO'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

## FROM DJUKANOVIĆ TO WHERE?

### ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Montenegro has been marred by strong political turbulence, whose main driver has been the gradual loss of power by long-time former President Milo Djukanović and his party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which have been in power since the country introduced multipartitism in 1991. Djukanović's hold on power guaranteed Montenegro's hold on Western values and Euro-Atlantic institutions, building on a strong Montenegrin national identity and decoupling from Serbia. At the same time, Montenegro became a classic case of 'stabilocracy', with a strong degree of state capture, corruption and political control of media and judiciary. Years of political tensions, due mostly to the attempts by DPS to marginalise the Serb minority in the country and to the strongly felt grievances against the perceived authoritarian rule by Djukanović, resulted in the ousting of DPS from power following the parliamentary elections in 2020, when a loose coalition of pro-Serb and civic forces – whose only common denominator was the removal of the ruling party from power – managed to form a short-lived government. Notwithstanding the ensuing instability, and the persistence of the divide between pro-Serb forces and the advocates of a strong Montenegrin identity, the presidential elections in March-April 2023 saw the final demise of Djukanović with the election of Jakov Milatović as president. His recently born 'Europe Now!' Movement managed to combine pro-Serb feelings with calls for economic development, with a populist twist. Parliamentary elections in June of the same year resulted in Europe Now! gaining the most votes, although not enough to form a government alone, with DPS managing to keep a fair share of support. As Montenegro embarks on the difficult process of forming a coalition government, its commitment to Euro-Atlantic values might be put to the test.



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## Executive summary

For Montenegro, the last three years have probably proved as the most politically dynamic since the country gained its independence from the State Union with Serbia in 2006. The gradual loss of power suffered by the Democratic Party of Socialists (Demokratska Partija Socijalista, DPS) and its leader, former President and Prime Minister Milo Djukanović, may be seen both as a signal of fatigue towards the establishment which ruled the country uninterrupted since 1991 and a reflection of the identity question underpinning Montenegrin society and its bonds with neighbouring Serbia.

Since the DPS lost the absolute majority in Parliament following the elections in August 2020, Montenegro entered a phase of political flux, with two succeeding governments based on loose and highly volatile coalitions. The initial desire to confine DPS at the opposition – the main feature of the government led by Zdravo Krivokapić – was at some point put aside by the need of the short-lived minority cabinet of Dritan Abazović to keep afloat. The end of Djukanović's hold on power, formally marked by his defeat at the second round of the presidential elections in April 2023 and somehow confirmed by the results of the early parliamentary elections the following June, might not be enough to seal a period of instability and soul-searching for Montenegro, both domestically and when it comes to its foreign alignment.

The arrival on the Montenegrin political scene of a new, catch-all party like the Europe Now! Movement (Pokret Evropa Sad!, PES) – a centrist, economy-oriented grouping that won the presidency and took the biggest slice of parliamentary seats – could be perceived as an attempt to bridge the big divide in local politics, as its leaders aim to combine European

and Western orientation with an embracing of Montenegro's strong relationship with Serbia. Its detractors, including DPS, which managed to still score an important result at the parliamentary elections as a not-to-distant second, consider PES to be just another, more charming, embodiment of Serbia's 'malevolent' influence in Montenegro and a tool for the local branch of the Serbian Orthodox Church to express its clout on the government.

Montenegro will now embark on long weeks of coalition-building: the choice by PES leader and potential Prime Minister-to-be Milojko Spajić on whom to form a government with will be crucial in deciding the future course of the country and the relationship with its strategic external stakeholders – the EU, NATO, as well as Serbia, Russia and China. The future balance of power in Podgorica – and its sustainability – will also provide a test case for the entire region, still lagging on its European integration path and often exposed to the illiberal economic and cultural agendas of several global third actors.

## Four years of turmoil. Montenegro's political dynamics from 2019 to 2023

Until 2020, Montenegro represented a classic case of 'stabilocracy' with a strong pro-Western orientation. Milo Djukanović has ruled the country almost without interruptions since 1991, serving four times as prime minister (1991-1998, 2003-2006, 2008-2010 and 2012-2016) and twice as president (1998-2002 and 2018-2023). His party, the DPS (stemming from

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**Montenegro's political transition.  
From Djukanović to where?**

the Montenegrin branch of the Yugoslav League of Communists) became the establishment party from the first multi-party elections in 1991 until its ousting from government in 2020. Throughout his three decades in power, Djukanović managed to steer the country away from its traditional alignment with Serbia, setting the course towards the strengthening of a Montenegrin national identity firmly anchored to Western and Euro-Atlantic values. Djukanović and the DPS were the driving force behind Montenegro's independence referendum in 2006, its application for membership to the European Union in 2008 and its membership in NATO in 2017. Djukanović's hold on power has been strongly defined by the need to distance Montenegro from Serbia, especially since abandoning their loose State Union. Relations between Podgorica and Belgrade remained marred by mutual distrust and disagreements: DPS launched initiatives aimed at distancing Podgorica from Belgrade to the maximum extent possible, such as the decision to recognise the independence of Kosovo in October 2008, the adoption by the Parliament of a declaration on Srebrenica, which set 11 July as a day of remembrance in Montenegro for the victims of the 1995 massacre, and the expulsion of the Serbian ambassador in Podgorica in late 2020, after the latter's described a 1918 decision to join the Belgrade-run Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes as an act of "liberation" and "free will" by the Montenegrin people (Belgrade promptly reciprocated by expelling the Montenegrin ambassador).

Until the parliamentary elections in 2020, DPS's grip on Montenegro's institutions was also made possible by a highly fragmented opposition, with very few sharing ideological and programmatic principles and united by the sole aim of toppling Djukanović and his allies from the presidency and the government. Since 2012, several opposition parties have gathered under the Democratic Front (Demokratski Front, DF) umbrella, a mainly electoral cartel putting together liberal-conservative forces

and pro-Serb parties. After the departure from the coalition of Miodrag Lekić, a former Yugoslav diplomat who almost managed to defeat DPS candidate Filip Vujanović at the 2013 presidential elections, DF became more radicalised, increasing its populist and pro-Serb tones, strengthening its links with Belgrade and self-assuming the task of 'defending' the political, cultural and religious rights of those Montenegrin citizens defining themselves as Serbs (around 30% of the total population, according to the latest census) against the perceived nationalist drive pursued by Djukanović and his ruling party.

In October 2015, DF managed to rally several thousand protesters in Podgorica, demanding the resignation of Djukanović as prime minister and new elections. The protests lasted for several weeks, and were characterised by a strong pro-Serb sentiment – supported by the participation of several high-ranking members of the Serb Orthodox clergy, including the now deceased head of its Montenegrin branch, Metropolitan Amfilohije – and partly turned into a call against Podgorica's NATO membership.

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The identity issue thus became a crucial feature of Montenegro's political discourse, also building on the criticism of the perceived autocratic and corrupt rule of DPS and its grip on the judiciary and the media. Furthermore, Djukanović made a point in portraying himself as the only guarantor of his country's Western orientation and its Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as a barrier against Serbia's and Russia's 'malevolent influences'. The uncovering by

Montenegro's security structures of an alleged plot by Serbian and Russian operatives, with the support of some local pro-Serb politicians, to storm Montenegro's Parliament and kill Djukanović on the eve of the 2016 parliamentary elections, only strengthened the former president's narrative.

Such a highly volatile context provided the environment for what can be considered as the peak of the polarisation of Montenegro's political and cultural scene. In February 2019, the uncovering of a series of alleged corruption scandals involving some top DPS members and one of the country's most important entrepreneurs unleashed a series of nationwide protests, demanding the president's resignation and the establishment of a 'technical' government. Later the same year, in December, the Montenegrin Parliament passed the controversial Law on Religious Freedoms, requiring religious communities to prove property ownership from before 1918, the year when Montenegro joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was subsumed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, losing all of its property in the process. Failure to produce such documentation would have allowed the state to take over the property. The law, proposed by DPS and adopted by its MPs (only DF boycotted the vote and heavily protested against it, and several of its MPs were even arrested during the session), was seen as an open attack by Djukanović against the Serbian Orthodox Church for its perceived attempts at undermining Montenegrin statehood and for its role as a Belgrade and Moscow proxy. The turmoil in 2019 and 2020 was the embodiment of the two, sometimes overlapping, souls of the opposition against Djukanović's grip on power: those who resented the corruption, the autocracy and the state capture by the DPS regime and those – mainly Serbs – who felt their identity was under attack by the perceived nationalist and identity-building policies inspired by the president and implemented by his government.

Years of tensions and polarisation had their toll on the DPS' performance at the August 2020 parliamentary elections, as the party, while maintaining its relative majority in the new Parliament, lost five percentage points and six deputies compared to the previous elections. The most important outcome, however, was that finally the different embodiments of Montenegrin opposition – from the civic, liberal to the pro-Serb parties – agreed to join forces to form a government excluding DPS from power for the first time since the country allowed multi-party elections in 1990. The three main opposition coalitions – the DF-led 'For the Future of Montenegro' (Za Budućnost Crne Gore, ZBCG), the centrist 'Peace is Our Nation' (Mir je naša nacija) led by Democratic Montenegro (Demokratska Crna Gora, DCG) and the green-liberal 'Black On White' led by the United Reformist Action (Ujedinjena reformska akcija, URA) – agreed on forming a government, united by the only shared goal of ousting DPS from power, choosing university professor Zdravko Krivokapić (previously aligned with DF) as the new prime minister. The coalition agreement was based on the principle that no prominent political figure would become a member of the new government, thus paving the way for an 'expert cabinet'. Such a decision, strongly supported by PM Krivokapić himself, was not keenly accepted by DF, which began threatening the new government's tenure almost from the beginning. The fact that Krivokapić, notwithstanding his personal connection to the Montenegrin branch of the Serbian Orthodox Church and his pledge to amend the most controversial parts of the Law on Religious Freedoms, did not manage to accommodate the more radical demands by the pro-Serb forces in his government (like withdrawing Podgorica's recognition of Kosovo and changing the State symbols), turned DF against the prime minister. When Justice Minister Vladimir Laposavić, a former member of the Serbian Orthodox Church's legal team, questioned the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia's description of the 1995 Serb killings of thousands of Bosnians

in Srebrenica as genocide, Krivokapić had him sacked with the support of URA and the opposition parties, with the latter then passing a resolution to label those crimes as genocide.

While the rift among the ruling parties got worse by the day, it was URA – and not DF, which anyway was by then part of the coalition in name only – to propose in February 2022 a no-confidence vote against Krivokapić with the support of DPS, leading to the fall of the government only 14 months after its inauguration. Dritan Abazović, deputy prime minister in the outgoing government, leader of URA and the main architect of the demise of Krivokapić, was then appointed by Djukanović as the head of a minority cabinet in April, with the vital external support of DPS itself – proving that ideological issues often took the backseat in Montenegrin politics when achieving power was the main goal. Nonetheless, the honeymoon period between Abazović and Djukanović lasted only three months, as the new government was toppled in August 2022 by a no-confidence vote tabled by DPS and another Abazović's former ally, the Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska Partija, SDP), due to the prime minister's signing of an official agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church to formalise relations. The agreement obliged, among other things, to register all Orthodox churches and monasteries as belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church and to start the restitution process of Church property nationalised or confiscated by the Communist authorities after the Second World War. Abazović was also criticised by civic-oriented parties for his support for Open Balkan, a loose and not well-defined regional integration initiative spearheaded by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, seen by many as an attempt by Belgrade to establish its influence over the region.

Montenegrin politics entered into yet another deadlock, as Djukanović did not approve former presidential candidate Miodrag Lekić, the new

choice as prime minister put forward by DF, claiming that his name was put forward on the basis of recently approved unconstitutional changes to the Law on Presidential Powers, which significantly curbed the president's choice over who should lead the government. Abazović thus remained in charge as interim prime minister until the formation of a new government following the parliamentary elections.

### **What a Europe Now! Montenegro might look like**

The heavy polarisation of Montenegrin society over the country's identity, mixed with power politics, led to a seemingly never-ending conundrum and undermined Podgorica's ability to cope with its reform obligations stemming from the EU integration. In such a gloomy scenario, the victory of the Europe Now! Movement, led by Milojko Spajić and Jakov Milatović, at both presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023 suggested the beginning of a new phase. In less than a year, PES tried to find some common ground among Montenegrins' varying and conflicting identities, putting forward a strong pro-EU drive (as its very name suggests) combined with messages aiming at reassuring the country's Serb minority, as well as stressing the importance of good-neighbourly relations with Serbia. At the same time, the Movement put – with some populist tones – economy as its number one priority.

To a certain extent, Spajić (who has both Montenegrin and Serbian citizenship, which

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prevented him to run for president according to Montenegro's legislation) and Milatović provided a clean and young face to a dwindling Serb political representation: their positive score as the most popular ministers in Krivokapić's government (Spajić was his finance minister, while Milatović was the economic development minister) and their close relationship with the Serbian Orthodox Church made them a safer bet to channel Serb votes in Montenegro compared to veteran figures like Andrija Mandić, one of DF long-time leaders who scored third in the first round of the presidential elections in March.

After being sworn in as president and following a smooth passage of powers with Djukanović, Milatović – a former European Bank for Reconstruction and Development economist – struck all the right chords, appeasing both ends of the Montenegrin electorate. On one side, he dismissed any possibility to de-recognise Kosovo, stressing how its independence "is a fact", invited Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani to his inauguration, re-affirmed Podgorica's condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during the June summit of the European Political Community in Chişinău. On the other, he chose Podgorica as the venue for his inauguration instead of Cetinje, the old royal capital and one of the symbols of Montenegrin statehood (apparently also out of security concerns), took part in the annual commemoration of the Doli Pivski massacre of Serb civilians by the German SS in 1943, the first time a Montenegrin president attended the event organised by the Serbian Orthodox Church, and stressed his support for Montenegro to join the Open Balkan Initiative..

When it comes to government formation, the picture looks more complicated. PES managed to get the most seats (24) although way short of an absolute majority, while the main surprise was how DPS managed to keep a significant share of votes, obtaining 21 seats. A repetition of the 2020 scenario, however, looks unlikely, as PES will

struggle to build a viable ruling coalition based on the need to exclude DPS from power, considering how poor the relationship among former allies has become – especially between the next likely PM Spajić and Abazović, whose URA might have looked like a natural (although insufficient) coalition partner for PES. It would be even harder to imagine Europe Now! forming an alliance either with the remnants of DF or with DPS.



*Montenegro is still far from exiting the political crisis it entered more than four years ago.*



## Conclusions

As the excitement following PES victories and the ousting of DPS starts to fade away, Montenegro is still far from exiting the political crisis it entered more than four years ago. It might prove difficult for President Milatović and Prime Minister-to-be Spajić to find a balance between the two souls of the country, while also overcoming the personal-power politics that seems so strong in Montenegro. PES might have to show a robust dose of pragmatism in order to navigate a still turbulent political environment, while also addressing the slow pace of EU integration, which has basically been taken hostage by the recent political infighting. Accession negotiations were opened with Montenegro in June 2012: 33 of 35 chapters have been opened, while only three chapters (Science and Research; Education and Culture; External Relations) have been provisionally closed so far. Before further negotiation chapters can be closed, the interim criteria in the rule of law chapters (23, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, and 24, Justice, Freedom and Security) must be met. During the election campaign, PES promised to speed up the accession process, but given the current situation, it seems Montenegro's hopes to become the EU's next member will still have to wait.

**Montenegro's political transition.  
From Djukanović to where?**



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**EMBRACING THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES' EU ACCESSION AT PRESENT**

**A VITAL QUESTION MARK FOR THE EU**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper highlights the challenges and geopolitical shifts impacting the European Union (EU) enlargement process for the Western Balkan (WB) region. Concerns over democratic institutions and reluctance of some EU member countries have significantly slowed down the enlargement process. To overcome obstacles, the EU has been pushing in the region both the reforms needed but also the idea of reaching regional integration as a way to enhance welfare, growth, and stability. However, these strategies have not yet yielded the desired results.

The outbreak of Covid-19, geopolitical tensions, and an increasingly confrontational global environment might well compel the EU to reassess its regional engagement and provide a credible enlargement path for the WB. Yet, reforms are not only needed in the WB, but also in the EU to make its decision-making process more efficient. Notwithstanding current obstacles, the shifting global order and the influence of external actors in the region make the WB inclusion within the EU of vital importance for the European security and stability at large.

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**POLICY BRIEF**  
August 2023

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**IS A NEW PATH TO ENLARGEMENT POSSIBLE?**

**A LOOK AT THE PROPOSALS FOR STAGED ACCESSION**

**ABSTRACT**

This policy brief analyses the most relevant proposals – developed both within the European institutions and by independent research centres – on the staged accession methodology for the EU enlargement process toward the Western Balkans.

It also includes a summary of the discussion held at the network meeting of Friends of the Western Balkans in June 2023, putting together the different positions emerged, the uncertainties declared, and the new proposals developed during the discussion. Finally, the policy brief highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, indicating which aspects can be improved.

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**POLICY BRIEF**  
December 2023

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**BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA**

**HOW TO BUILD A VIABLE ROAD TO EU MEMBERSHIP**

**ABSTRACT**

Since its beginning with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2005, Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU path has been marred by the country's unwillingness to gather the necessary political consensus to adopt the reforms needed to improve its functionality, its rule of law and its democratic standard. This feature has proved itself true throughout BiH's EU journey. The limits of conditionality have been overcome by Brussels' and the member states' several decisions to lower the bar and allow Sarajevo to go further. The 2022 decision by the Commission and the Council to grant BiH the candidate status stems from almost purely geopolitical considerations, rather than from the effort of Bosnian institutions to reform. The same will most likely be true when, in March 2024, the Commission might recommend the Council for the opening of accession negotiations.

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