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Montenegro towards the Challenges of the European Union Integration Process after the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections of 2023

Abstract

In 2023, Montenegro held both presidential and (early) parliamentary elections. They brought a change of power: the defeat of the former president Đukanović, the most influential figure in the political life of this country for 30 years, and the defeat of the DPS group, which failed to recover after losing the elections 3 years ago. The elections were held in a tense internal situation, resulting from religious and ethnic contradictions, as well as underlined identity issues, combined with the language used in the country.

As a result, the group Europe Now! has taken over the power. And the government was headed by the leader of this movement, Milo Đukanović. Movement politicians face an important task, which is to continue negotiations related to the desire to join the European Union. Montenegro has been negotiating the membership since 2012, so far without any effect. The main problems on the path to the EU are insufficient anti-corruption measures, the need to fight organised crime and the relatively low assessments of Montenegrin democracy. The new authorities announced changes in this respect in the election campaign and accelerated the whole process.

Keywords: Montenegro, EU enlargement to the Balkans, Milo Đukanović, Montenegro elections, Montenegro negotiations with the EU, Milo Đukanović

Montenegro, as an independent state, appeared on the political map of Europe in 2006. From that moment, one of the main objectives of its foreign policy became accession to the European Union, which was an ambitious objective. Over the next years, efforts were made to achieve this goal, both through the activity of successive governments and Milo Đukanović and his environment. Nonetheless, Montenegro has not yet managed to become a member of the Union, and it is difficult to determine when this will happen. This was due to internal reasons (in principle, no significant progress on the path to accession) and external ones (no concrete decision in Brussels on enlargement to the Balkans).



The parliamentary and presidential elections in the country in 2023 contributed to the new political situation, which may have come as a surprise. The position of the presidential party, the Democratic Party Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), has weakened since 2020, and Đukanović lost the election in 2023.

In the current situation, doubts about the further perspective of integration with the European Union become important. In my opinion, the main objective of this article is the answer to the following research questions: 1) what were the reasons for the loss of the hitherto president? 2) to what extent can the governments of the new coalition leave their mark on the process of negotiations concerning the EU membership? In order to answer such questions, methods characteristic for political and administrative sciences were used, i.e. the method of systemic analysis, the historical method, the method of analysing existing data and literature, and the prognostic method, because it is indispensable to be able to predict the development of the political situation in a given country.

Background of the Political and Social Situation in Montenegro before the Elections in 2023

Already before the election year of 2023, the political scene in Montenegro was noticeably off-balance. This was in opposition to the period of relative stability, which was observed after gaining the independence of the state in 2006. The reasons for this course of action were varied and the parliamentary election of 2020 became a discernible breakthrough.

For many years Milo Đukanović was a kind of the guarantor of political stability, often referred to as the “father of Montenegrin statehood”. There is no exaggeration in this definition since for many years he sought to gain independence by the republic. Đukanović was the head of Montenegro for more than 30 years. In February 1991, he became the Prime Minister of the Republic (which was then part of Yugoslavia) at the age of 29, then served 6 more times in this office, and in the meantime he was also the President. Initially, a Serbian leader, Slobodan Milošević, remained a model for him, but he was able to go his own path and continue the course on the political and economic independence of a small Adriatic state. An important economic merit was the introduction of the German mark as a currency (unilaterally) at the end of 1999, followed by the euro, which was a reaction to the loss of value by the Serbian dinar. Đukanović built a circle of trusted people around him, who were his family and friends, and who in the subsequent years played an important role in Montenegrin politics. They also decided to gradually move away from ties with Serbia and pursue independence, which in hindsight was a well-thought-out, balanced and logical decision¹.

Also his merit and the group of people around him was a decision on a pro-European direction after gaining full independence. Nevertheless, this goal (in the form of accession to the European Union) was not achieved, which is a dubious merit of the Montenegrin political elite over the last 15 years and this was directly related to what the “Đukanović Group’s” governance looked like. In 2023, his political career was interrupted as a result of his defeat in the presidential election.

¹ M. Łakota-Micker, *Milo Djukanović – droga na szczyt*, “Horyzonty Polityki” 2021, vol. 12, no. 38, pp. 53–59.

In Montenegro, in recent years, it is impossible to escape from the turgid issues, which include: 1) matters related to the Orthodox community and the functioning of the Serbian and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches², 2) Serbian influence in the Adriatic state, 3) the issue of the ethnic affiliation of the inhabitants of Montenegro. All these three issues were very important because they referred to the vast majority of the society. What is crucial, not only the second issue but, in practice, all of them, influenced greatly the contacts with Serbia.

Serbian-Montenegrin contacts, for a few years, have been described as tense, despite far-reaching religious, identity, language and political connections. According to the statistical data from 2011³, more than ¾ of the population of Montenegro declare an Orthodox religion, and they belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SCP) and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CCP). However, the latter is not recognised by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, nor by Belgrade and Moscow as autocephalous. In recent years, it has been strongly supported by the state and President Đukanović. The tensions related to belonging to one of them have also been used in recent years in current politics. The DPS group and the president promoted the support of the local Orthodox church, which was part of the broad pro-Montenegrin identity discourse, but at the same time it contributed to the increase of divisions in society, as discussed below. The issue of the dispute over both Orthodox churches was significant at the time of the proclamation of Montenegrin independence. The tensions arose irregularly, and the rulers did not pay much attention to religious matters for some time⁴. In 2011, Đukanović noted in one of his statements that his group would seek to establish a single Church in the country, and a few years later the idea of merging SCP and CCP into one Orthodox church appeared⁵. This could certainly resolve disputes but the problem lies in the feasibility of this idea.

The assessment of the SCP, in terms of the pro-Montenegrin narrative, was negative and resulted also from the fact that the Serbian Orthodox Church opposed the separation of the two republics in 2006, claiming that it is the “disunity of the Serbian nation”. Such words were included in Patriarch Pavle’s letter of May 2006. In the following weeks, SCP did not address the issue of Montenegrin independence in the media⁶.

This problem, as described later in the discussion, has escalated in the last few years. It is, therefore, justified to assume that the growing contradictions were used by the parties to the political dispute in order to gain an advantage. The support of Đukanović and DPS for the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (in fact, understandable for many reasons) consoli-

² The Montenegrin Orthodox Church treats itself as a national church, it is in opposition to the Serbian Orthodox Church and the conflict between the two – especially in recent years – has become increasingly turgid, especially as both treat the area of this country as so-called canonical territory. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church also treats itself as a continuation of the Orthodox Church, which operated originally until 1920 and was autocephalous. Vide: R. Bońkowski, *Słowianie środkowopółudniowi na przelomie XX i XXI wieku*, Katowice 2010, pp. 134–139.

³ Detailed data from the latest census are not yet available (as of 25 May 2024). It is only known that the population of this country increased slightly (by 2.1%).

⁴ For instance, in 2005, the SPC on the top of Mount Rumija (near Bar), a holy mountain from the point of view of Christians and the followers of other religions, contributed to the construction of a small tin Orthodox church. But it did so without the permission of local and state authorities. This resulted in criticism from the CCP. Nevertheless, the building was not demolished. Vide: A. Domachowska, *Proces budowania narodu czarnogórskiego w latach 1991–2018*, Toruń 2019, pp. 225–226.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 223.

⁶ M. Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, *Serbowie jako mniejszość w warunkach transformacji politycznej w państwach byłej Jugosławii 1995–2016*, Kraków 2017, p. 371.

dated the hostility of both churches. Despite the attempts taken by the government to influence the heated church dispute, the residents of the state put greater confidence in SCP, and only 7% of the respondents believe that CCP should have the status of the only church in Montenegro, and for 1/3 SCP should have this status⁷.

Equally important is the issue of the relationship between identity and languages used by the citizens of Montenegro. Montenegro's 2007 constitution clearly states that it is a multinational and multilingual state. The official character of this language has been confirmed, although it has also been mentioned that Serbian, Albanian, Bosnian and Croatian languages are in the official use, as well⁸. The last census of 2011 demonstrated that nearly 45% of the country's population declared themselves as Montenegrins (almost 29% as Serbs), but at the same time only 37% described themselves as Montenegrin speakers. At the same time, the use of the Serbian language on a daily basis was indicated by nearly 43%⁹. Some of the inhabitants of the country feel that they are Montenegrins, however, they use Serbian in their everyday life. Taking these data and the passage of time into account, the results of the December 2023 census should be closely monitored. It can have a significant impact on the country's possible ethnic and linguistic cohesion¹⁰. Undoubtedly, the fact that more people declare the use of Serbian than Montenegrin nationality is puzzling and points to the intricate, perhaps not yet completed, process of building the identity of Montenegrins.

The aforementioned census was finally held on 3–28 December 2023, it was postponed for fear of a boycott by the opposition, and as a consequence the panel of the census committees was extended to include their representatives. In the period immediately before the census, the mobilisation of Serbian politicians, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian-speaking media became noticeable so that as many inhabitants of the country as possible would identify themselves as Serbs during the census. The Serbian authorities were also accused of influencing the census¹¹.

The language issue in Montenegro was problematic, among other things, due to the fact that it was in a relatively long state relationship with Serbia. The Constitution of the Republic of 1992 stated that the official language was Serbian. A major breakthrough was the linguistic conference held in Podgorica at the end of November 2004, when it was proved that the Montenegrin language was already fully codified and standardised¹². Intellectual circles supporting the Montenegrin language played an important role in the process of gaining the independence of the state. This seems to be important because even during the 2003 census, more than 63% of the respondents declared that they use Serbian on a daily basis, while only 22% declared using Montenegrin¹³.

⁷ A. Domachowska, *Proces budowania...*, pp. 234–235.

⁸ *The Constitution of Montenegro*, art. 13. https://biblioteka.sejm.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Czarnogora_ang_010117.pdf (date accessed: 25.01.2024).

⁹ *Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u Crnoj Gori 2011. Godine. Stanovništvo Crne Gore prema polu, tipu naselja, nacionalnoj, odnosno etničkoj pripadnosti, vjeroispovijesti i maternjem jeziku po opštinama u Crnoj Gori*, Podgorica 2011, [https://monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje\(1\).pdf](https://monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje(1).pdf) (date accessed: 22.05.2024).

¹⁰ The article presents the author's knowledge as of 25 May 2024, when the detailed results of the census were not known yet.

¹¹ A. Domachowska, *Spisy powszechne w Albanii i w Czarnogórze*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2024, vol. 28, no. 1052 of 12 February.

¹² R. Bońkowski, *Słowianie środkowopółudniowi...*, pp. 83–88.

¹³ A. Domachowska, *Proces budowania...*, p. 176.

The linguistic issue is important, especially considering another kind of a “dormant problem”, which is the question of citizenship. It is estimated that there are about 120,000 people living in Montenegro, for whom Montenegro is not a place of permanent residence and therefore they cannot obtain Montenegrin citizenship. During the period of the DPS party governance, this issue was not resolved, and it was probably feared that granting citizenship to these people (most often refugees, as well as other people from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Croatia in the 90’s of the previous century) could affect ethnic relations (that is the number of individual groups), as well as the political scene, because without citizenship one cannot take part in elections.

Montenegrin citizenship could be obtained by origin, birth in the territory of the country, acquisition or in accordance with international agreements. The acquisition involves, among other things, the necessity to renounce the citizenship of another country and living in Montenegro continuously for 10 years (prior to submitting the application). Dual citizenship is not allowed. These provisions were lessened in February 2022, as the necessary period of permanent residence in the republic was shortened to 5 years. What is interesting, the current prime minister, Milojko Spajić, also does not hold Montenegrin citizenship. He acquired Serbian citizenship after Montenegro declared its independence, and consequently could not candidate in the 2023 presidential election. Nevertheless, this did not prevent him from becoming the head of government¹⁴.

These contentious issues may, for the outside observers of the Montenegrin political and social scene, come as a big surprise because this country – especially compared to the other Balkan states – may have appeared so far as a rather calm place and without any problems. Yet, it was a false and superficial picture.

The parliamentary elections held on 30 August 2020 should certainly be regarded as a turning point of recent years in Montenegro. Although the ruling DPS party won the elections (gaining 35.06% and 30 seats in the Parliament), the opposition parties gained more support. The coalition “For the Future of Montenegro”¹⁵ received 32.55% of the votes (27 seats in the Parliament) and the coalition “Peace is our nation”, with its leader, Aleksa Bečić, 12.53% of the support (10 seats)¹⁶. If we look at the composition of individual opposition coalitions, we can conclude that the political scene was very fragmented at that time. What united them was certainly the dislike of Đukanović group which was ruling for years and the desire to remove it from its office.

The main topics of that campaign were the aforementioned issues of identity and controversies concerning the law on the freedom of religion adopted in the Parliament at the end of 2019¹⁷. It triggered protests in many parts of the country (Podgorica, Budva, Kotor,

¹⁴ A. Domachowska, *Spór polityczno-prawny wokół kwestii nabywania obywatelstwa w Czarnogórze*, “Komentarze IEŚ” 2023, vol. 184, no. 936 of 28 August.

¹⁵ The main component of the coalition was the Democratic Front party, considered to be pro-Serbian and pro-Russian, but at the same time negatively oriented towards Montenegro’s membership in NATO. Andrija Mandić, who later became a candidate in the 2023 presidential election, was an important politician of this party.

¹⁶ *Konačne rezultate za izbor poslanika u Skupštinu Crne Gore, 2020*, <https://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/KONA%C4%8CNI-2020-za-sajt.pdf> (date accessed: 20.02.2024).

¹⁷ The adopted law mostly did not rise any doubts, except for the provisions referring to church property. Religious communities operating in Montenegro had to prove that they owned certain goods before 1 December 1918, when Montenegro became a part of the SHS Kingdom. If they were not able to do so, then the property

Nikšić, Bar, Plužine) and also in Serbia (including at the Montenegrin embassy in Belgrade). The Serbian authorities also reacted, opposing the law and sympathising with local Serbs. The Serbian Foreign Minister, Ivica Dačić, even suggested that the Montenegrins who live in Serbia and support the government in Podgorica could lose their citizenship. Undoubtedly, the new law contributed to the escalation of tensions in relations between Belgrade and Podgorica. It was also the time when social divisions increased.

The main differences in the pre-election campaign generally concerned internal affairs, as the parties involved in the election unanimously supported the pro-European course in external policy. The opposition opted for the withdrawal of the controversial law and support for the Serbian Orthodox Church, and it also promised to speed up the process of negotiations on accession to the EU. It also referred to the need for far-reaching internal reforms, also to speed up the process of accession to the Union¹⁸. An important role in the election campaign was played by the SCP organising protests of a religious and political nature¹⁹. The fact that negotiations concerning the post-election coalition of the government were held in one of the Serbian monasteries was very thought-provoking²⁰.

The victory of the opposition groups was not significant and their fragmentation did not contribute to the stability of the political scene. Apart from these two elements, the third important power was the coalition of an Albanian politician, Dritan Abazović, known as “Black on White”. In total, the opposition won 41 seats in Skupština, which gave the minimum possible majority. In the following months, a government was formed, led in December 2020 by Zdravko Krivokapić, the leader of the coalition “For the Future of Montenegro”. He held this office until April 2022. He was succeeded by Abazović, who served as a Prime Minister until the end of October 2023.

The Democratic Front’s participation in governments was regarded as an opportunity to increase the Russian or Serbian influence in Montenegro. In fact, the Serbian authorities were honest about the help, including financial aid, which was provided to the Serbian organisations in Montenegro. The Front was formally dissolved in May 2023.

The 2020 elections demonstrated that even in Montenegro a power alternative is possible, and it became a reality. The loss of the dominant position by DPS appears to have been a matter of time, and the growing public dissatisfaction was noticed earlier, for example, during numerous social protests in 2019, which broke out as a consequence of the so-called “envelope” scandal²¹.

was to be transferred to the State. The supporters of such a solution were the ruling DPS and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The law was criticised by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which feared the loss of many goods, because in 1920 a part of the church property was taken over by the SHS Kingdom and placed under the administration of SCP. Vide: A. Domachowska, *Czarnogóra: protesty społeczne po przyjęciu ustawy o wolności wyznania*, “Komentarze IeŚ” 2020, vol. 9, no. 106 of 22 January.

¹⁸ A. Domachowska, *Możliwa zmiana rządu w Czarnogórze po wyborach parlamentarnych*, “Komentarze IeŚ” 2020, vol. 148, no. 245 of 2 September.

¹⁹ M. Vukomanović, *Populism and Religion in the Western Balkans: the Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church*, in: *Faces of Populism in Central and South-Eastern Europe*, H. Dajč, N. Styczyńska (eds.), Kraków 2023, pp. 69–73.

²⁰ D. Mikucka-Wójtowicz, *Europeizacja partii i systemów partyjnych państw południowo-wschodniej Europy*, Kraków 2021, p. 94.

²¹ In 2016, one of the entrepreneurs recorded the handing of an envelope with a bribe to the mayor of the capital and one of the activists of the DPS. The money (USD 100,000) was intended to finance the election

The Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro in 2023

The period after the 2020 elections was a difficult time for cooperation between the head of state and the government. President Đukanović refused to sign several laws, dismissals of 7 ambassadors and the chief of the army's general staff. Initially, he did not sign an amendment (liberalisation) to the aforementioned law on the freedom of religion, although after the rejection of the law by the Parliament, he finally had to do so. This was undoubtedly a new situation, because for 30 years the political system of this country has not experienced the phenomenon of cohabitation.

Relations with Serbia were also becoming increasingly difficult. Although Prime Minister Krivokapić underlined the willingness to improve relations with Belgrade, it was not implemented. President Vučić, who was ruling Serbia from 2012, was present for the first time in Montenegro not earlier than at the end of 2020 at the funeral of Metropolitan Amfilohija, which contradicted the narrative of the alleged closeness of the two countries. The next point of tension was the resolution of the Montenegrin Parliament, adopted in June 2021. It stated that genocide took place during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the denial of genocide in Srebrenica was prohibited, and 11 July (the anniversary of this event) was established as a Day of Remembrance for the victims of Srebrenica. The Democratic Front voted against it, which caused the ruling coalition to be shaken. Furthermore, the reactions coming from Serbia were not too diplomatic: President Vučić even stated that people voting for the resolution should not be allowed into Serbia, because according to him it was supposed to affect the dignity of the Serbian people. It was also the time of the first opinions on the need for an early election²².

This was justified because over time there were escalating tensions in Krivokapić's government. It was aggravated by low social ratings, also related to the questionable response of the authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2022, Dritan Abazović took the control of the government, and he received the support of 46 parliamentarians, including a part of the DPS, which was not part of the government. The cabinet sought, among others, to conclude an agreement defining the property relations of the state with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Yet, in external relations, he was in favour of joining the initiative known as "Open Balkans", as discussed further in the article. It is also worth adding that in 2022 Montenegro supported the EU's sanctions against Russia after its aggression towards Ukraine, and the local Interior Ministry froze over 40 properties belonging to Russian citizens. This, in turn, resulted in including Russia on the list of so-called hostile states. DPS support for the new government was conditional and it was withdrawn after the government announced its willingness to agree with SCP and the possibility of joining the "Open Balkans" initiative²³.

Year 2023 became an election year in Montenegro. While the presidential elections were held as planned, the parliamentary elections were early. This was due to the dynamic

campaign of the said group. These protests are considered to be one of the turning points enabling the unification of the opposition against the rulers.

²² A. Domachowska, *Serbia i Czarnogóra: pogarszające się relacje między państwami*, "Komentarze IeS" 2021, vol. 114, no. 417 of 6 July.

²³ A. Domachowska, *Czarnogóra: nowy rząd premiera Dritana Abazovicia – trudna europejska perspektywa w świetle podziałów wewnętrznych*, "Komentarze IeS" 2022, vol. 181, no. 669 of 4 August.

situation in the country. The visible features of this were the declining public support for the DPS, in practice, the inability of forming a government with a stable parliamentary majority, as well as turgid internal issues contributing to political tension.

The weaknesses of the Abasović government meant that from August 2022 it functioned as a so-called technical government, and therefore a transitional one. From 20 September 2022, the work of the Constitutional Tribunal was paralysed due to the lack of its quorum and the inability of Skupština to elect missing members. The European Union and the Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe, called for judges to be elected. The dispute was finally settled only at the end of February 2023, when the Parliament elected 3 of the missing 4 judges, which allowed it to finally hold a session²⁴.

Another alarming event was the amendments adopted by a minimum majority in the Parliament on 1 November 2022, which provided for the limitation of the constitutional powers of the head of state. According to the changes, if the president did not appoint a prime minister within the prescribed period, then the parliamentary majority could do so. The second amendment concerned the appointment and dismissal of ambassadors, as there were also disputes between Đukanović and the government majority in this respect²⁵.

The first presidential election was held on 19 March and in the case of a possible second round on 2 April. 7 candidates took part in the first round, including only one woman. For the incumbent president, it was not an easy election, especially due to the fact that in the previous year there were local elections, during which the DPS party gained power only in 2 of 16 municipalities where the election took place (for example, it lost a majority in the capital).

Two candidates (Mandić and Bečić) were considered pro-Serbian, in total they obtained more than 30% of the votes, which clearly indicates this influence in the Adriatic Republic. Both were clearly favoured by Serbian media (such as Pink and Happy television channels). The campaign was not free from the cases of disinformation (e.g. fake public opinion polls) and physical violence when the attack on J. Milatović took place during a rally in Cetinje²⁶.

Just before the election, President Đukanović decided to dissolve Skupština, which meant early parliamentary elections scheduled for June. It is difficult to surmise to what extent this decision translates (or does not translate) into his public support. The fact is that in the first round he achieved more than 6 percentage points of advantage over Jakov Milatović with a turnout exceeding 64%. Despite this, his situation was not very optimistic in the face of support for his opponent from the pro-Serbian politicians mentioned above and from Prime Minister Abazović. This support was probably quite troublesome and the new president must take into account its consequences.

²⁴ S. Kajosevic, *Montenegro Starts Unblocking Constitutional Court, Electing New Judges*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/02/27/montenegro-starts-unblocking-constitutional-court-electing-new-judges/> (date accessed: 22.03.2024). The Constitutional Tribunal has a total membership of 7 people. At that time, due to the expiry of the term of office, it had only 3 members and could not gather. The problem with Skupština's election was that the candidate must get the support of 2/3 of the members of the Parliament.

²⁵ A. Jagiełło-Szostak, *Czarnogóra na rozdźwięku: kryzys polityczno-instytucjonalny*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2022, vol. 254, no. 742 of 13 December.

²⁶ J. Wojnicki, *The 2023 Elections in Montenegro. A Real Political Breakthrough?*, in: A. Adamczyk, G. Ilik, M. Tahirović, K. Zajączkowski (eds.), *Poland's Experience in Combating Disinformation: Inspirations for the Western Balkans*, Warsaw 2023, p. 202.

The second round of the election confirmed these concerns, as the incumbent president suffered a clear defeat with a high turnout of more than 70.1%. The new, young President, Milatović (born in 1985), an economist by education, announced his focus on internal problems (reducing unemployment, raising the minimum wage, stopping emigration from the country, introducing reforms in the judiciary sector and police, fighting corruption and organised crime) but, at the same time, he stressed the need to accelerate negotiations with the EU's institutions. After the second round, he even promised that during his first term Montenegro would be in the European Union. This is a promise that will be a bit overgrown and it will be difficult to keep. He also announced the country's cooperation in the framework of the regional initiative "Open Balkans", which some consider an attempt by Serbia to dominate the Western Balkans region²⁷.

Milo Đukanović's defeat may mean the actual end of his political career in Montenegro, although at this point it is far too early to predict such future.

The winner of the election obtained over 221.5 thousand votes in the second round, the loser – fewer than 156 thousand. The former president in a decisive vote received the most support in municipalities in the south-east of the country, including Tuzi and Ulcinj (mostly Albanian), as well as Rožaje, Plav and Gusinje (where the largest population is Bosnians) and in the conservative Cetinje. The detailed results of the election are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The results of the presidential elections in Montenegro in 2023

Candidate	Support in the 1 st round (in %)	Support in the 2 nd round (in %)
Milo Đukanović	35.37	41.12
Jakov Milatović	28.92	58.88
Andrija Mandić	19.32	
Aleksa Bečić	11.10	
Draginja Vuksanović	3.15	
Goran Danilović	1.38	
Jovan Radulović	0.76	

Source: data taken from: *Državna izborna komisija Crne Gore*, www.dik.co.me

Early parliamentary elections were held on 11 June 2023, with 15 electoral committees. The pre-election campaign was untroubled and there was a restrained reference to topics polarising the society. Nevertheless, populist assertions related to the social and economic sphere were clearly visible²⁸. Among the latter, there are the promises of wage increases (minimum wage would be at least EUR 1,000), pensions (minimum pension would rise to

²⁷ A. Jagiełło-Szostak, *Wybory prezydenckie w Czarnogórze: triumf Jakova Milatovicia i początek zmian?*, "Komentarze IeŚ" 2023, vol. 75, no. 827 of 6 April.

²⁸ A. Jagiełło-Szostak, "Powściągliwa kampania". *Czarnogóra przed wyborami parlamentarnymi w czerwcu 2023 roku*, "Komentarze IeŚ" 2023, vol. 114, no. 866 of 9 June.

EUR 450) and others, such as the introduction of a 7-hour working day or the elimination of unemployment²⁹. The winning party upheld these promises after the election results were announced, which makes it clear how they will be implemented. DPS promised monthly grants and the construction of social flats. The need to form a post-election coalition meant that individual political leaders were temperate when it came to attacking each other. Therefore, strictly political and identity problems, related, among others, to the future of Montenegro as an independent entity, became overshadowed by other issues. What is important, during the campaign there were no voices questioning the European direction of the country's foreign policy.

The winner of the parliamentary election was the PES group led by Milojko Spajić, gaining more than 25.5% of the votes and 24 seats in the 81-seat Parliament of Montenegro. Slightly more than 2 percentage points lower of support was received by the DPS party of former President Đukanović. Despite, at first glance, only a slight difference in support, the failure of the Socialists was significant, as compared to the 2020 elections, they received almost 13 percentage points fewer of votes. The pro-Serbian Coalition “For the Future of Montenegro” had even a worse result, they received support by almost 18 percentage points lower than 3 years earlier. The split among the Serbian parties also played its role, as a result of which some of them did not enter the coalition and did not enter the Parliament by running alone. The exact results of the election are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of the parliamentary elections in Montenegro of 11 June 2023³⁰

Group	Election result (in %)	Number of seats in the Parliament
Movement Europe Now! (PES)	25.53	24
Coalition Together (DPS)	23.22	21
Coalition “For the Future of Montenegro” (NOVA, NSD, DNPCG)	14.74	13
Aleksa and Dritan – Courage counts (DCG, URA)	12.48	11
Boszniak Party	7.08	6
SNP and DEMOS	3.13	2
Albanian Forum	1.91	2
Albanian Alliance	1.49	1
Croatian Citizen Initiative (HGI)	0.91	1
TOTAL:		81

Source: The author's study based on: *Konačne rezultate za izbor poslanika u Skupštinu Crne Gore*, <https://dik.co-me/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/KONACNI-REZULTATI-2023.pdf>

²⁹ These promises were made mainly by the Europe Now Movement! (PES – Poret Evropa sad!).

³⁰ Groups represented in the Parliament have been considered.

The turnout was 56.28% and it was lower than expected. The reasons for such a situation should be explained by the fatigue of the society with a kind of electoral marathon, because within 7 months it was the fourth election (after the local government elections and two rounds of presidential elections)³¹.

Such results undoubtedly contributed to the further fragmentation of the political scene in the analysed country. This forced them to build the coalition necessary to govern, which was not easy. The election of the head of state also had an impact on the results, as President Milatović pointed out that he could not imagine any cooperation with the DPS group after the elections if there were no changes in it. The PES undoubtedly embodies a generational change in Montenegrin politics³². Milojko Spajić, the leader of the movement, is even younger than the president, born in 1987. He has an economic education, he studied in China and Japan, and has knowledge of 6 languages, which is certainly an asset compared to the politicians of the older generation. But there are some questions whether this will translate into effectiveness in the talks in Brussels.

Following the elections, forming a new government was not an easy task. It was headed by Spajić and in addition to the PES, the government is supported by the group “Aleksa and Dritan – Courage Counts”, some members of the pro-Serbian coalition “For the Future of Montenegro” and representatives of the Albanian minority. The new government received support in the Parliament only on 31 October 2023, more than 4.5 months after the election. This fact demonstrates difficulties and is the result of the continuing social and political divisions, ethnic interests and the far-reaching fragmentation of the political scene³³.

The government supported 46 members of the Parliament. Andriy Mandić³⁴, a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian politician, was the head of Skupština, which once again clearly indicates the need for the new cabinet to cooperate also with these groups.

The New Political Order after 2023 and Negotiations about Accession to the European Union

The strategic documents concerning the future of Montenegro were drawn-up after the declaration of independence. The process of integration with the European Union was one of the main objectives of the foreign policy of the Adriatic Republic, and these priorities were adopted in November 2017. The aspirations related to the desire to join the Union

³¹ *Konačne rezultate za izbor poslanika u Skupštinu Crne Gore*, <https://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2023-07/KONACNI-REZULTATI-2023.pdf> (date accessed: 20.11.2023).

³² Ł. Kobeszko, *Wybory w Czarnogórze: porażka socjalistów i kontynuacja zmian*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-06-14/wybory-w-czarnogorze-porazka-socjalistow-i-kontynuacja-zmian> (date accessed: 18.03.2024).

³³ J. Wojnicki, *The 2023 Elections...*, p. 206; Ł. Kobeszko, *Nowy rząd Czarnogóry: długo oczekiwana stabilizacja władzy wykonawczej*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-11-06/nowy-rzad-czarnogory-dlugoo-czekiwana-stabilizacja-wladzy-wykonawczej> (date accessed: 19.03.2024).

³⁴ His ties to Serbia are also evidenced by the fact that in the years 2021–2023 he received the Order of the Serbian Flag (the second most important Serbian award, given by the President), the Order of the White Angel (received from the Serbian Orthodox Church) and the Order of Honour, awarded by the Serbian Republic in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both the time and the place of their awarding are difficult to consider accidental.

also appeared in the 2008 National Security Strategy. Whereas, the December Defence Strategy from the same year highlighted the need to develop the skills needed to join the Union³⁵.

As a consequence, the appropriate international action was taken to achieve these ambitious objectives. The talks with the EU had to take place within the framework set by the EU for the Balkan area. After 2000, this took place in the scope of the Stabilisation and Association process, the inherent feature of which was signing the so-called Stabilisation and Association Agreements. The EU's institutions started talks with Montenegro on this subject in 2005 and the Agreement was signed in March 2007. The authorities in Podgorica submitted an application for the EU membership in December 2008. After two years, Montenegro was granted a candidate status. Accession negotiations began in June 2012³⁶.

There is no doubt, therefore, that we can speak of noticeable successes on the path to the Union in the first years of independence. Talks were undertaken quickly, which could create the illusion that the two sides would reach a consensus within the next few years. The initial rapid progress was due to two factors: the status of the state, which was not questioned internally or externally, and the agreement of the main political forces on the direction of foreign policy³⁷. The vast majority of the population also supported this course of action³⁸.

The desire to join the Union was the only goal that united the Montenegrin political groups. It was also intended to bring together a divided Montenegrin society. Researchers classify the majority of the parties there as pro-European, with the exception of the pro-Serbian Democratic Front, which was Eurosceptic from the beginning. This was reflected, among others, by its participation in anti-NATO protests or accusations of participation in the preparations for the coup that was to be carried out on the day of the parliamentary elections in 2016³⁹.

The first talks which were held concerned the negotiation chapters number 23 (justice and fundamental rights and reforms in this area) and 24 (justice, freedom and security). It was no coincidence that these areas would raise far-reaching doubts, so they wanted to provide a lot of time for them.

Today, 12 years after the talks began, it is already known that the goal has not been achieved. In the opinion of the author, the reasons for this state of affairs should be seen on both sides: Montenegro and the EU's institutions. From the very beginning, during the talks they drew attention to the noticeable shortcomings on the Montenegrin side. They concerned such issues as the lack of progress in the fight against organised crime, lack of progress in the talks in the various so-called accession chapters, problems related to the

³⁵ M. Babić, *Polityka bezpieczeństwa państw Bałkanów Zachodnich. Perspektywy i zagrożenia*, Toruń 2019, pp. 103–107, 130.

³⁶ K. Kozbiał, *Czarnogóra w procesie integracji z Unią Europejską. Szanse i wyzwania*, "Politeja" 2015, no. 5 (37), pp. 217–220.

³⁷ V. Vučković, *From a Good Pupil to a Bad Student of the EU Integration Process: Europeanisation of Montenegro*, in: *Balkanizing Europeanisation: Fight against Corruption and Regional Relations in the Western Balkans*, V. Vučković, V. Đorđević (eds.), Berlin 2019, p. 151.

³⁸ In the years 2007–2011 it was even more than 70% of support.

³⁹ D. Mikucka-Wójtowicz, *Europeizacja partii...*, pp. 148–151, 285–287.

rule of law criteria, corruption problems⁴⁰, and concerns – especially in recent years – about the instability of governance. This was highlighted in the annual reports of the European Commission on progress on the path towards the Union. Given the concerns raised by the EU's institutions over the rule of law in Poland and Hungary in recent years, the EU is particularly sensitive to this, and Montenegro is by no means a role model here.

The problems with corruption were certainly among those that appeared relatively frequently in the accession talks. From the beginning of the independence of the state, corruption concerned such areas as spatial planning (e.g. questionable tourist investments on the coast), construction, privatisation, judiciary, taxation, customs, police or health services. Despite the adoption of various strategies and plans, progress was illusive, which caused a decrease in confidence in the state's institutions and its functioning⁴¹. A dozen years ago, Đukanović was accused of taking part in smuggling cigarettes to Italy and belonging to a criminal group involved in the trafficking of cigarettes. In this case, he testified – of his own will – as the prime minister in the prosecutor's office in Bari⁴². This was undoubtedly part of the accusations related to the mafia nature of the Montenegrin state and the ruling elites.

It was also problematic that the ruling DPS declared reforms in key areas which were objected by the EU, but in practice it was a simulation of actions. It was only in 2016 that this party for the first time (sic!) referred to the allegations in Brussels on the subject in the manifesto in which it highlighted the need to fight corruption and organised crime, guarantee the equality of citizens in terms of law and the need to reform the judiciary⁴³.

Low ratings from the EU's institutions did not come from nowhere. According to the Freedom House's annual report on the state of democracy and freedom, in 2023, Montenegro was among the 9 European countries that were described as partially democratic (Belarus and Russia were described as devoid of democracy). The country was classified in a remote place in the world with a score of 67 out of 100 possible points⁴⁴. According to the Economist, this is a flawed democracy, ranked 52nd in the world, with a score of 6.67 out of 10 points, with the lowest rating of political culture⁴⁵. These assessments are therefore not encouraging, especially due to the fact that it is generally difficult to see progress in the analysed respect.

President Milatović is aware of the challenges that come with the Republic's efforts to join the EU. He was a vice-president of the Movement Europe Now!, which won the par-

⁴⁰ V. Vučković, *From a Good Pupil...*, p. 160.

⁴¹ M. Łakota-Micker, *Czarnogóra. Studia nad bezpieczeństwem*, Wrocław 2013, pp. 82–87.

⁴² B. Barlovac, *Djukanovic Used Immunity in Cigarette Smuggling*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/01/11/book-djukanovic-used-immunity-in-cigarette-smuggling/> (date accessed: 27.04.2024).

⁴³ D. Mikucka-Wójtowicz, *Europeizacja partii...*, p. 149. In the previous manifestos and programmes, the DPS often referred to the European integration, even in the titles of electoral programmes and coalitions, but never before 2016 did it in relation to the problems of corruption and organised crime. So we can talk about 10 years wasted in this respect.

⁴⁴ *Global freedom status 2023*, <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2023> (date accessed: 16.03.2024). In Europe, the worst was only (in the order starting from the worst): Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Moldova and Hungary.

⁴⁵ *Democracy Index 2023. Age of conflict*, <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf> (date accessed: 16.03.2024). Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina were rated lower than Montenegro. Kosovo was not evaluated at all. It is worth noting that 3 EU Member States scored worse than Montenegro: Croatia (58th place), Romania (60) and Bulgaria (62).

liamentary elections after his victory. This again means that the position of the head of state and the prime minister is taken by politicians from the same group. This is undoubtedly an argument for being able to speak of a wide range of opportunities for influencing internal and external policies. This will probably be conducive to negotiations with the European Union, although it must be remembered that the governments of Đukanović and DPS did not turn into the final success of the negotiations, despite the passage of years.

After winning, Milatović announced Montenegro's accession to the EU during his presidential term, so in 2028 at the latest. The answer to the question of whether this is possible seems to be a mere divination of grounds. Yet, objectively, it should be stressed that this will be extremely difficult and will also depend on the determination of the EU to complete the "Balkan enlargement". It is worth mentioning in this context that 2018 was to be a breakthrough in the EU's approach to this enlargement. For the first time after 15 years, the EU-Western Balkans summit was held, the European Commission presented a new strategy for the area, and the Commission President, Jean Claude Juncker, mentioned the implementation of the plan for Serbia and Montenegro to join the EU by 2025⁴⁶. The Union has not kept its word again, which makes us look with extreme caution at the current situation, both in Montenegro and in the other countries of the region.

The success of the negotiation process is primarily the responsibility of the Milojko Spajić's government. The PES group, apart from the prime minister, also included important ministries: Foreign Affairs, Justice, European Affairs and Finance. Undoubtedly, they will be crucial both in the talks about membership and in the implementation of the requirements of the European Union. Political stability is certainly an important issue, which in such an internally divided country will not be easy. Nevertheless, the objective of accession to the Union should unite the various political groups. The coming years will show whether such an agreement beyond divisions is possible and whether it will bring the expected effect. Cooperation with neighbours who basically have the same goal will also be of importance. New faces in Montenegrin politics can be a positive impulse and a kind of new openness in the negotiation of membership. On the other hand, they are inexperienced politicians who will be forced to react to internal problems. But they do not appear to be weakening.

In this context, Montenegro's further attitude to the Open Balkans initiative may be relevant. It is a regional format for political and economic cooperation in the Balkans, currently including Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, with the aim of increasing exchanges between them, further cooperation and thus improving bilateral relations. The format was created in 2019, it provides for faster movement of goods (owing to the abolition of border controls between these countries) and is undoubtedly an attempt to prepare for potential EU membership. Further forms of cooperation were agreed in 2021, such as the recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications and access to labour markets. Prime Minister Abazović has already declared that Montenegro is interested in this cooperation, but so far it has not been implemented. Some Montenegrin politicians perceive this format as an attempt by Serbia to dominate the region, similar voices are also noticeable in Kosovo. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that the success of the idea and the

⁴⁶ K. Koźbiał, *Proces rozszerzenia Unii Europejskiej na obszar Balkanów Zachodnich jako wyzwanie dla przyszłości integracji kontynentu*, "Społeczeństwo i Polityka" 2019, no. 3 (60), p. 136.

inclusion of the other Western Balkan countries in the “Open Balkans” would be regarded positively by the European Union. Montenegro’s participation in this initiative could be important to convince Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina to take the same step. This issue will also be important for the new Montenegrin authorities.

As regards Montenegro’s aspirations for the membership of the Union, it should not be forgotten that other important international role players are also trying to play a prominent role in this part of the continent. Russia is active, which in Montenegro is visible in the political sphere (e.g. contacts between Serbian groups and Russia, the so-called coup attempt during the 2016 parliamentary elections), social (proximity of the SCP with the Moscow Church), economic (Russian investments on the coast in the tourism and real estate sector). Russia was not satisfied either with Montenegro’s accession to NATO in 2017⁴⁷.

Chinese influence on a small Balkan country is also noticeable. This is particularly evident in the investment sector (modernisation of the railway line between Kolašin and Kos, financed by the Chinese bank Exim of the Bar-Boljare motorway)⁴⁸. The Montenegrin government has taken out a loan of almost USD 1 billion for these investments and its repayment is currently a problem.

Russian and Chinese influence should make the EU’s decision-makers think about the European path of Montenegro’s development. The continued long-term exclusion of this country from the EU structures could have negative consequences for the entire Balkan region.

Summary

In 2023, Montenegro held both presidential and (early) parliamentary elections. They brought about a change on the political scene, resulting from a tense internal situation caused by many factors: social, religious, ethnic, and finally personal, concerning the fatigue of the long-term rule of Đukanović and his group. What was also significant was the aggravated identity discourse, in which the former president described himself as a defender of Montenegrin identity, which ultimately did not bring him support. Foreign policy issues were also important, including the long-term – so far ineffective – efforts to join the European Union.

As a result, the government in the country was taken over by the politicians of a new generation, such as President Milatović and Prime Minister Spajić. They both promised to speed up the talks on the EU membership, which would not be possible without serious domestic reforms, which have been abandoned so far, but also cooperation with neighbours. The fulfilment of these promises will certainly not be easy.

The prospective accession to the European Union (it is difficult to indicate any date here) will mean political and economic stability for both Montenegro and the other countries

⁴⁷ Due to the volume of the text, the author does not undertake an analysis of Russia’s influence in Montenegro. This topic is discussed extensively in A. Domachowska, *Wpływ rosyjskie w regionie Bałkanów Zachodnich. Cz. II: Albania, Czarnogóra*, “Prace IeŚ”, Lublin 2021, pp. 43–86.

⁴⁸ K. Koźbial, *Proces rozszerzenia...*, p. 140.

of the Balkan region. The political changes that have taken place in the analysed country are far-reaching, because for the first time during the period of independence, new people will have an impact on domestic and foreign policy, not associated with the hitherto dominant political scene of Milo Đukanović and the DPS party. In this new situation, all decision-makers are on the side of the new political constellation. Will they benefit from this opportunity? At this point, it is not possible to give a clear answer to this question, especially since a clear policy of the European Union is also needed for the success of the objective. This may turn out to be even more of a problem than the conduct on the Montenegrin side, especially as other international role players are also trying to influence the country.

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