

ROAD TO EUROPE:  
POLITICS OF MONTENEGRO BETWEEN 2006 AND 2016

A review by András Braun \*

*Abstract:* After a more than one year long political crisis, parliamentary elections were held in Montenegro on 16 October 2016. Although the country was led by an interim government, the party of Prime Minister Milo Đukanović prepared to maintain its power after the elections as expected. In the past few years, Montenegro experienced many crises. Protests began on the one hand, against the government and against NATO membership on the other. Also the formation of the Marković Government showed that the political division remained strong in the Western Balkan state.

*Keywords:* Montenegro, Elections, European Union, NATO, Milo Đukanović, Duško Marković, DPS, NGO's.

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Introduction

The governing DPS remains the strongest party in Montenegro, as the divided opposition was unable to break the more than two decades reign of the party. Since Milo Đukanović came to power in 1991, he was able to create a balance and plans with full of ambition. He also managed the independence process of the country. After a close result, the objective of the independent Montenegro was to achieve the EU and NATO membership. Beside these ambitious goals, the prime minister has been criticized by many political and civil society actors especially in the past few years. In these debates the focus was on lack of human rights, rule of law and other essential democratic values. (Tomović, 2016)

The DPS won the elections in 2016 however the party was not able to gather the majority of the votes. Therefore the ethnic minority parties were the scale: positioning was the key factor that affected the formation of the new government. Another big question concerning the formation of the new government was the retreat of Milo Đukanović. Leading the country since 1991 – with two retires – Milo Đukanović decided to pass the baton to a new generation.

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\* The author: András Braun (1990) PhD Student, Eotvos Lorand University, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Budapest.

The aim of this article is to present the current political situation in Montenegro since the independence of the country. During these 10 years, Montenegro became 1) an official candidate country to the European Union, 2) opened the negotiation chapters 3) and is in a process of joining NATO.

Beside these important successes, Đukanović received many critics too. Fierce charges against the prime minister and his ruling party are the lack of crucial elements of democracy: rule of law, free media and elections, high level of corruption and organised crime cause also problems.

In the first part of my article I intended to present the successful Montenegrin improvement on the level of international politics. In the second part, I reviewed the most important domestic political issues since the independence of the country.

### *The independent Montenegro within the Western Balkans region*

After the independence referendum, Montenegro became a sovereign and fully independent country in 2006. This was also the end of the federation of Serbia and Montenegro, the remains (or ruins) of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In this article I do not want to enter into the complex circumstances of the independence process, but I feel it necessary to highlight some crucial milestones.

In 1992, Montenegro as one of the republics of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia decided to remain in the federation. Since 1991, the main leader of the country was Milo Đukanović, who had a strong alliance with Serbia ruling Slobodan Milošević. The “small” Yugoslavia (or Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in its official name) existed until 2003, when the two entities agreed to rename their state to Serbia and Montenegro.

During this political marriage, signs of crises could be discovered.

Insufficient institutional functioning, persistent constitutional crisis and another war incident describe this period. More serious events happened after the Kosovo War, Serbian president Slobodan Milošević was not able to stay in his position. It is only after his fall, when real democratic transition could have started in Serbia. The situation was different in Montenegro. Podgorica wanted to keep its distance from Belgrade and from its (political) influence. Montenegro’s message was clear: they wanted independence. Although Serbia and even the International Community in this time tried to convince Montenegro to stay in the federation, Đukanović was ready to move. The leader of DPS discovered many economic and political advantages of an independent state.<sup>1</sup> Even the strong relations between the nations were not enough to keep the alliance together.

Finally, Montenegro held its referendum in 2006 and became an independent state. New cleavages emerged in the new country. Later, I will present that all of these cleavages can be linked to Milo Đukanović.

The most important political goal of the new country was the accession to the European Union and to the NATO. A possible Euro Atlantic integration of a former Yugoslav republic was also attractive to Brussels. Since 2003, through the start of the Stabilisation and Association Process, the possibility was given to the Western Balkan countries.<sup>2</sup> The independence of Montenegro gave the opportunity to redefine its relations with the EU, and with the other countries from the region.

### *Relations between the European Union and Montenegro*

It is very clear that among the WB6 countries Montenegro is in the best position in the integration process. However, the country must expect an enduring accession process, as it could be observed during the Croatian accession. Also the European Union has its own political crisis, as the member countries too. This crisis period can have a strong effect on the accession process of the WB6 countries.

In September 2006, the dialogue has started between the EU Commission and the Montenegrin Government. The EU Commission proposed a new partnership, which was signed in January 2007. In October 2007, Montenegro signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). In July 2009, Commissioner Olli Rehn gave a questioner to the Montenegrin Government. Since December 2009, citizens of Montenegro do not need visa anymore to enter to the European Union. In November 2010, Montenegro became an official candidate state to the European Union. In June 2012, the European Union started the

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<sup>1</sup> For example Montenegro’s position would be better on the EU accession talks. Just to remind, in this period, Serbia was not totally committed to the EU accession.

<sup>2</sup> In 2003 the Western Balkan countries were: Serbia and Montenegro, FYR Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania. Today: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, FYR Macedonia, Albania.

accession negotiations with Montenegro, and the first accession chapter was opened in December. Many other chapters were opened since than during the EU accession talks.

As of 30 June 2016, 24 negotiating Chapters, including the rule of law Chapters, 23 – Judiciary and fundamental rights and 24 – Justice, freedom and security, have been opened, and two Chapters (25 – Science and research and 26 – Education and culture) have been closed. (Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro, 2016)

Beside these great results, the country reports – created by the EU Commission – criticised the Đukanović Government in many aspects. In the last years, political institutions, corruption, human rights, rule of law, lack of economic reforms, media and political freedom were key points of the critics. However, the EU representatives accepted Milo Đukanović as a legal and legitimate partner in the EU talks.

The European Union also assisted to maintain political stability in the country during the political crisis. With EU assistance, it was possible to organise an interim government, which managed the country until the elections of October 2016. But still, Milo Đukanović was able to remain prime minister in this interim government.<sup>3</sup>

The current Montenegrin identity lies not only on the independence, but also on the support of the EU.

### *Montenegro and the NATO*

But not only EU has a strong influence in the region. Even after the successful stabilisation of the region, security is still a crucial and sensitive factor. Therefore, NATO is another major player in the Western Balkans region. As many other international actors have their own interests in the Balkans, the region is still a dividing and divided crossroad. In that sense the NATO accession is a far more sensitive question, than the EU membership.<sup>4</sup> Still, in the case of Montenegro, NATO membership is considered not only as the guaranty of the security, but also as an important step towards the Euro Atlantic integration and an important path on the EU accession process.

Remembering and returning to the essential objective of the 1990s, stability can be reached by the Euro Atlantic Integration. Therefore it is necessary to analyse the WB6 relations not only with the EU, but also with the NATO.

NATO's expansion in SEE<sup>5</sup> has started with the accession<sup>6</sup> of Slovenia (2004), and then continued with Croatia and Albania (2009). NATO's open door policy, based on Article 10<sup>7</sup> (The North Atlantic Treaty 1949) allows any countries to join the Alliance, and aims to promote stability, cooperation and democratic values. (NATO, 2015)

So far Albania is the only WB6 country who joined the Alliance, but Montenegro will be next one in the near future. (Relations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016) On 19 May 2016, the NATO Foreign Ministers signed Accession Protocol with Montenegro. (NATO Foreign Ministers sign Accession Protocol with Montenegro 2016) Montenegro's continuing pre-accession talks with the EU, and this process is helpful and by acceding to the NATO, would have a positive political effect not only for the country, but also for the whole region. A successful NATO membership would give a strategic regional importance for the NATO, and it can strengthen the long term stability of the region.<sup>8</sup> (Nicolini and Lorenz 2015)

Montenegro's accession to the NATO would show that the consolidation and transformation of the Western Balkans occurs as a whole process. This consolidation cannot be continued if the rest of the

<sup>3</sup> This initiative, comparing to the one in Macedonia was much more successful. Political stability remained in the country.

<sup>4</sup> Russia is against of the NATO expansion in the Balkans, and great dilemmas can be discovered in some WB6 states regarding this question, like in Serbia or in the Republika Srpska in BiH.

<sup>5</sup> Southeast Europe

<sup>6</sup> The accession process:

1. Accession talks with a NATO team
2. Invitees send letters of intent to NATO, along with timetables for completion of reforms
3. Accession protocols are signed by NATO countries
4. Accession protocols are ratified by NATO countries
5. The Secretary General invites the potential new members to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty
6. Invitees accede to the North Atlantic Treaty in accordance with their national procedures
7. Upon depositing their instruments of accession with the US State Department, invitees formally become NATO members

<sup>7</sup> Article 10: "The Parties may (...) invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty." (The North Atlantic Treaty)

<sup>8</sup> If the WB6 countries will not be able to join the EU and the NATO, Russia is sure to penetrate in this vacuum.

countries will not join the Alliance.<sup>9</sup> (Milinkovich 2016) However the enlargement fatigue experienced in the EU and the absence of enlargement progress in 2012 in the NATO could give some reasons to reconsider the integration of the WB6 countries into the Euro Atlantic Community.

But the question is what will happen after Montenegro gains full membership to the Alliance?

It is more likely that after the accession of Montenegro to the NATO there will be a pause of enlargement either in the EU and the NATO. Despite the conflict of interests between NATO countries and Russia, it can be stated that Montenegro's and the other WB6 countries accession to the Alliance remains a very important key point in the transformation and Euro Atlantic Integration process. Maintain stability and peace in a post-conflict area is always more important, than short-term power interests. (Braun, 2016: 8-34)

### *The reign of DPS*

The points described above are the genesis of the new and still present cleavages in the country.

Although Montenegro became independent because of a referendum, the result was very high. There is still a very strong identical divide among the citizens of Montenegro. Only 45% of the inhabitants considered themselves Montenegrin, 35% of the population have still Serb identity.

This divide can be observed in almost all of the political aspect of the country: political parties, relations with neighbourhood states, and also EU and NATO membership.<sup>10</sup>

The cleavage structure of Montenegro already existed before the independence of the country. This fact demonstrates that in Montenegro the long term political confrontations are still present and they are still relevant. This cleavage structure is composed by three essential elements.

The first: authoritarian vs democratic political system. The political transition in Montenegro was guided and controlled by the former (communist) elite. However new political elite emerged during the early 90s, they were related to the Communist Party, and also had strong relations with the Serbian political elite. The leaders of this new elite, Momir Bulatović and Milo Đukanović supported to maintain Yugoslavia. That time this trend was even supported by the citizens because of nostalgic tensions. After the first multiparty elections, the League of Communists of Montenegro broke up and its place was taken by the DPS (Democratic Party of Socialists). Milo Đukanović was able to maintain the power and the control over the key political institutions.

The second: progressive or conservative way? In 1997 a severe fracture happened in Montenegro. While Đukanović emerged as party leader, Bulatović formed his own party, the SNP (Socialists People's Party of Montenegro). The SNP remained a pro-Serbian-Montenegrin unionist party. Since 1997, the DPS was a pro-independence party, influenced by Đukanović.

Finally, the third cleavage was the independence vs union. And as it was mentioned above, the previous triumphed over the latter after the independence referendum in 2006. (Vuković, 2011, 60-70)

Since 2006 the DPS is still the strongest party in Montenegro. The following chart shows a clear overview of the election results of the past ten years. (Election Guide, 2016)

1. Table: Parliamentary Election Results of the DPS and its coalition partners between 2006 and 2016.

Election Year	% of popular vote	Overall seats won	Seat change	Coalition
2006	48.62%	41*	+2	DPS-SDP+ Albanian Party
2009	51.94%	48*	+5	Coalition for a European Montenegro, Albanian Party
2012	45.60%	39*	-7	Coalition for a European Montenegro
2016	41.41%	36	-3	Liberal Party of Montenegro

\* in Coalition

It is obvious that the Democratic Party of Socialists is still the biggest and strongest party in Montenegro. However, numerous criticisms of the government emerged, which focused on the lack of initial democratic values. The government has been criticised on several occasion by non-governmental organisations, opposition parties and even by coalition partners. This process led to a political crisis.

<sup>9</sup> Serbia could be an exception.

<sup>10</sup> Another crucial point is Russia.

*The political crisis: pressure on the Government*

In October 2015 a huge protest was organised by the opposite party Democratic Front (DF)<sup>11</sup> (Radojević, 2012) The goal of this protest was the request to form an interim government, which can organise free and fair elections in 2016. These continuous events culminated in a political riot in Podgorica on 24 October 2015 and caused the split of the ruling coalition in January 2016. In the meantime, a protest against NATO membership was held in Podgorica on December 2015. (Tomović, 2016) But even the increasing challenges, the Montenegrin Government was able to play social divisions. The NATO accession is still a gap between Montenegrin citizens.

Also non-governmental organisations raised their voice against abuse of power. Many governmental actions have been criticised, including the electoral law and the Presidential Elections of 2013. Concerns were expressed regarding cultural divisions in the society. Besides that, they also expressed their worries to some institutions, like the Agency of Corruption, the State Election Commission, the Prosecutor Office, and many others. One of the most important assets of the NGO's is the depoliticisation of these institutions. These organisations played an active role in the accession process. (European Commission, 2015: 8)

In the 2015 Country Report, the European Commission highlighted that Montenegro's electoral law (the legislation was adopted in 2014) needs to be fully implemented. Besides that the report also proposed to strengthen the State Election Commission (the budget of this institution was increased in 2015). (European Commission, 2015:6)

Also international political actors expressed their concerns regarding the political situation of Montenegro. Therefore the elections were held in heightened mood.

*After the elections: the third retire of Milo Đukanović*

The opposition parties were quite divided before and also after the elections in Montenegro.

The DF was led by Miodrag Lekić until 2015. Lekić was also running for the presidency in 2013. In March 2015, he split from the DF alliance and formed a new party, the DEMOS. During the elections in 2016, the DF was led by Andrija Mandić. (RTCG, 2015) Lekić later formed the Key Coalition (composed of DEMOS, SNP and URA). (Vijesti, 2016)

The elections were held on 16 October 2016. In total 9 parties will share the 81 seats of the Parliament. The DPS – as predicted – won the elections, however the party did not get the majority of the votes. Therefore the winner party needed to find a coalition partner in order to form the new government. The minority parties (Albanian, Bosniak, and Croatian) have been traditional partners of Đukanović in the past; they mandate were enough to secure the majority for the DPS in the parliament. (b92, 2016)

The main opposition parties are the Democratic Front (18 mandates), the new formed Key Coalition (9 mandates) and Democratic Montenegro (8 mandates). The SDP got 4 seats, while the Social Democrats (SD), former coalition partner of the DPS got 2 seats. (Državna Izborna Komisija, 2016)

After two retires, and two returns,<sup>12</sup> Prime Minister Milo Đukanović decided<sup>13</sup> to quit his position. However it is not excluded that the former prime minister will run for the country's presidency in 2018. (Minić, 2016) According to the news, party officials were quoted that Đukanović would be replaced by his deputy, Duško Marković. (Borger, 2016)

Even after his retire, Đukanović will remain a powerful figure, as the chairman of the DPS. His departure may ease the country's progress towards the EU accession -Montenegro has set a goal of joining the EU by 2020. However this goal is considered unrealistic, because of Montenegro's problem with organised crime<sup>14</sup>, corruption and of course there is an enlargement fatigue on the EU side-. (Macdowall, 2016)

*The Marković Government*

<sup>11</sup> The Democratic front is a special big-tent or catch-all party formation of the New Serb Democracy (NOVA), Movement for Changes (PzP), Democratic People's Party (DNP), Workers' Party (RP), Democratic Party of Unity (DSJ), Yugoslav Communist Party of Montenegro (JKP), Democratic Serb Party (DSS), Resistance to Hopelessness (OB), Party of United Pensioners and the Disabled (PUPi) and Serb Radical Party (SRS).

<sup>12</sup> Đukanović has already retired in 2006 and 2010, but later he decided to return.

<sup>13</sup> Đukanović announced his government was investigating a possible Russian role in an alleged 16 October coup plot aimed at derailing the country's elections.

<sup>14</sup> In recent months, several Montenegrin towns, including the capital Podgorica, have been hit by bomb blasts. The police is unable to caught the perpetrators. (Tomović, 2016)

The government of Duško Marković was elected on 28 November 2016, by the Montenegrin Parliament. The DPS formed coalition with Social Democrats and national minority's parties: the Bosniak Party the coalition of Albanian parties and the Croat Civic Initiative. The governing coalition has 41 seats in the legislature. (RFERL 2016) According to the opposition parties, Marković is under the strong influence of Milo Đukanović, therefore they boycotted the voting session. (Vijesti 2016)

Prime Minister Marković has introduced a completely new government. Marković's idea was to bring fresh faces into his cabinet. The minorities are holding five seats in the cabinet, however the Serbs who are the second largest ethnic group in the country do not have ministerial position in the new government. (Tomović 2016)

### Conclusion

Since its independence, Montenegro achieved many important results in the transition process. The country became an official candidate state of the European Union, and started the accession negotiations, while 24 chapters from the 35 have now been opened.

However the pro-EU DPS government experienced many difficulties regarding the NATO accession process. The country is still divided and political identity is still a dangerous crisis factor. This phenomenon can be observed around the post-Yugoslav countries.

Many critics emerged against the long term ruling DPS government. Retire of the charismatic leader, Milo Đukanović can result a next step in the transition process, but can also disrupt the political stability of the country. Nevertheless even after his retire Đukanović will certainly remain a major figure in Montenegrin politics.

But still, it is important to notice that non-governmental organisations, the civic society, and opposition parties were able to put pressure on the ruling party in order to achieve reforms, while representing their interests. These kinds of acts are the fundamental principles of a democratic society.

The future of Montenegro lies not only on a successful political transition, but also on a strong economic performance, and on a political system which is supported by the citizens (all ethnic groups) of the country.

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