

Zlatko Vujović / Ana Nenezić

Montenegro in Crises Navigating Political Turmoil and the Path to European Integration

Abstract

Montenegro in Crises – Navigating Political Turmoil and the Path to European Integration

This article examines the complexities of Montenegro's ongoing political crisis, revealing the complex relationship of political actors and the Serbian Orthodox Church, and their influence on the formation and collapse of successive governments since the fall of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS).

In the recent presidential elections, President Đukanović, leader of the long-dominant DPS, faced a decisive defeat against Jakov Milatović of the new political party Europe Now which indicated a major shift in public sentiment. Đukanović stepping down from his position as the leader of DPS further signaled a potential transformation in Montenegro's political dynamics. Consequently, the results of the upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for 11 June 2023, will have significant implications for Montenegro's European integration process, regional stability, and its role in the NATO alliance. The analysis sheds light on the dynamics of Montenegro's political landscape by discussing the challenges posed by the rapid rise of populist parties and the potential consequences of their economic policies on the country's financial stability. It explores the upcoming parliamentary elections as critical junctures that may determine Montenegro's future trajectory – either returning to the Western political orbit and solidifying its EU membership or becoming an unstable link in the NATO alliance.

Dr Zlatko Vujović

is President of the Center for Monitoring and Research (CeMI) and Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro.

Ana Nenezić

is Executive Director of the think tank Center for Monitoring and Research (CeMI), and a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro.

Contact: zlatko.vujovic@cemi.org.me / ana.nenezic@cemi.org.me

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Introduction

Montenegro is currently facing a political crisis marked by economic challenges, disagreements over religion and identity, and a struggle between pro-Western and pro-Serbian/pro-Russian forces. The country's political landscape is unstable and fragmented, with no clear resolution on the horizon. Once a frontrunner in the Western Balkans' EU accession process, Montenegro is now regarded as problematic by its Western partners, including the EU. The outgoing government has failed to prioritize the country's European path and implement key reforms, resulting in a slowdown in the EU accession process. The influence of Serbia and Russia has frequently played a decisive role in making critical decisions,¹ while Western partners have found themselves with limited direct influence on the ruling parliamentary majority. The upcoming parliamentary elections will be crucial in determining the direction of the country and its commitment to European integration. The elections will also be critical for Montenegro's stability and its position within the NATO alliance.

The ongoing global crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the importance of Montenegro's NATO membership but has also exposed internal weaknesses reflecting political, national, and social fragmentation, which could be exploited for further divisions. The European Parliament, in its resolution on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union (2022), warned that conflict could expand to Western Balkan countries. This report recognized the Serbian Orthodox Church as a cause of "tensions between ethnic groups in the Western Balkans to inflame conflicts and divide communities."²

Historically, public attitudes in Montenegro have continuously shifted between the East and the West as Montenegro's foreign policy has been balancing between the various powers' geopolitical interests in the country. Its strategically significant position makes Montenegro more important than its size could suggest, with the presence and influence of the United States and the European Union on one side, and Russia and China on the other. Montenegro's Orthodox Christian and Slavic heritage have historically held strong ties with Russia, but these ties were politically weakened when the country shifted its foreign policy course towards Western liberal democracies, resulting in Montenegro becoming a NATO member in 2017, and being a frontrunner in the process of becoming an EU member country.

Despite the political crisis and political polarization influenced by foreign interference, Montenegrin citizens still strongly support EU accession. However, the level of polarization in Montenegrin society is evident when citizens are asked about their foreign policy alignment. Although a majority supports aligning with the European Union³ and the United States, a significant percentage also supports following the foreign policies of Russia, China, and neighboring Serbia.⁴ This is a direct indicator of the power of Russia's foreign influence. It is created through strategically disseminated narratives that Montenegro must return to traditional values within the wider Orthodox community, under Russian

1 *Dimitar Bechev, Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence 2019.*

2 *European Parliament, Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, 2020 9 March, 2020/2268(INI), article 123.*

3 *DeFacto Consultancy, Public opinion poll 2022, www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/stable-high-level-support-montenegros-membership-european-union_en?s=225*

4 *Center for Democracy and Human Rights, Political Public Opinion Poll of Montenegro, 2021, www.cedem.me/en/publikacije/public-opinion-research/*

motherhood as protector of the faith.⁵ These narratives mostly appeal to the nationalist parties in the country.

Under these circumstances, Montenegro entered a pivotal election cycle marked by the recent presidential elections, which involved a second round of voting for the first time since 1997. The contest between Milo Đukanović, the then-incumbent president, and Jakov Milatović, a vice-president of the rising non-parliamentary opposition party Movement Europe Now, proved to be highly significant. Ultimately, Milatović emerged victorious, marking a shift in the nation's political landscape. Following this defeat, Đukanović resigned, three days after the elections, from all his positions, including his role as the leader of DPS. The transition of power and the election of a new president within DPS will have an important influence on the party's future direction and impact on Montenegro's political landscape.

Montenegro now looks ahead to the upcoming early parliamentary elections. The outcome of these elections may considerably affect the country's political landscape and decide its future direction. These elections will show if the current ruling parties will continue to have a strong presence or if the opposition, which includes former President Đukanović's DPS and the extra-parliamentary party Europe Now of current President Milatović, will gain momentum.

Montenegro will face many challenges in the coming year, including organizing national elections and deciding the country's future direction. The question of whether Montenegro can avoid a financial crisis also remains crucial. Considering all the above, this article analyzes Montenegro's political crisis in depth, looking at its causes, key players, and possible outcomes.

Mapping Political Actors

The Montenegrin political landscape is characterized by a large number of political parties. The current parliament, with 81 MPs, comprises 18 parties, making it the most diverse assembly to date. Among these parties, eight have only one MP. This situation has arisen due to numerous pre-election coalitions, particularly within the ruling block, which wanted to avoid vote fragmentation among parties that would not surpass the legal election threshold of three percent of votes. The Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) is the largest party, with 29 MPs, followed by the Democratic Front (DF) with 19 MPs. This diverse composition makes the political situation highly unstable and parliamentary agreements challenging to achieve. Consequently, two governments have lost votes of confidence during the current parliamentary term, and the existing government, led by Dritan Abazović, has been serving more as a technical administration than a political one.

The Montenegrin party system has evolved from a dominant party system, with DPS holding an absolute majority in some periods, to a polarized pluralism, according to the classification by Giovanni Sartori.⁶ Providing a detailed analysis of the ideological and programmatic orientations and differences among all these parties would require extensive time and space, which is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we will use the parties' origins and formation to group them more effectively.

5 Milan Jovanović, *Shadows of Ukraine over Montenegro*, *Atlantic Council of Montenegro*, 2022, <https://dfcme.me/en/dfc-study-shadows-of-ukraine-over-montenegro/>

6 Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems – A Framework for Analysis*, Colchester: ECPR Press 2005.

Table 1: **Seat Allocation in Montenegro's National Parliament since 2006**

Party	2006		2009		2012		2016		2020	
	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)
Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)	32	39.5	35	43.2	31	38.3	35	46.9	29	35.8
Social Democrats of Montenegro (SD)	–	–	–	–	–	–	2	2.5	3	3.7
Bosniak Party (BS)	2	2.5	3	3.7	3	3.7	2	2.5	3	3.7
Liberal Party of Montenegro (LP)	1	1.2	0	0	1	1.2	1	1.2	1	1.2
Croatian Civic Initiative (HGI)	1	1.2	1	1.2	1	1.2	1	1.2	0	0
New Democratic Force (FORCA)			1	1.2	1	1.2	1	1.2	1	1.2
Democratic Union of Albanians (DUA)	1	1.2	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	1	1.2
Democratic Montenegro (DCG)							8	9.9	9	11.1
Democratic Alliance (DEMOS)	–	–	–	–	–	–	4	4.9	1	1.2
Socialist People's Party of Montenegro (SNP)	8	9.1	16	19.8	9	11.1	3	3.7	5	6.2
United Reform Action (URA)	–	–	–	–	–	–	2	2.5	3	3.7
Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (SDP)	8	9.1	9	11.1	7	8.6	4	4.9	2	2.5
Democratic Front Coalition (DF)	–	–	–	–	20	24.7	18	22.2	19	23.4
Democratic Front (DF) ⁷ (non-party affiliated MP)	–	–	–	–	7	8.6	–	–	–	–
SNS-NOVA	9	11.1	8	9.9	8	9.9	8	9.9	8	9.9
Movement for Changes (PzP)	11	13.6	5	6.2	5	6.2	5	6.2	5	6.2
Democratic People's Party (DNP)	–	–	–	–	–	–	4	4.9	6	7.4
Workers' Party (RP)	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	1.2	1	1.2
True Montenegro (PCG)									1	1.2
United Montenegro (UCG)									1	1.2
Democratic Party of Unity (DSJ)	1	1.2	0	0	1	1.2	–	–	–	–
Positive Montenegro	–	–	–	–	7	8.6	0	0	–	–
Democratic Party (DP)	–	–	–	–	1	1.2	0	0	0	0
Democratic League in Montenegro	1	1.2	1	1.2	–	–	–	–	–	–
New Serb Democracy (NS)	2	2.5	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Serbian Radical Party (SRS)	1	1.2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Albanian Alternative (AA)	1	1.2	1	1.2	0	0	0	0	0	0

7 Democratic Front (DF) coalition is composed of the following political parties: SNS-NOVA, Movement for Changes (PzP), Democratic People's Party (DNP), Workers' Party (RP), True Montenegro (PCG), United Montenegro (UCG), Democratic Party of Unity (DSJ).

Party	2006		2009		2012		2016		2020	
	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)	Seats	(%)
Democratic Serb Party (Montenegro) (DSS)	1	1.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
People's Socialist Party of Montenegro (NSS)	1	1.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens' Union "Civis"									1	1.2
AP			1	1.2	0	0	-	-	-	-
Montenegro	81		81		81		81		81	

Source: Zlatko Vujović (Parlamentarni izbori u Crnoj Gori 2012, see Footnote 8), updated by the authors

Introduction of Multi-party Democracy (1990)

The transition from a communist system to a multi-party system allowed for the formation of the political scene and the holding of the first multi-party elections in 1990. The Alliance of Communists of Montenegro, a communist party that ruled as part of the Yugoslav Communist Party from 1945, won the election. After the election, the party changed its name to the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and ruled alone (until 1997) or in coalitions (until 2020) for the next 30 years. Besides DPS, two political blocks were formed – a pro-Montenegrin block and a pro-Serbian block, which still exist today, although their leading parties at the time (the Liberal Alliance of Montenegro and the People's Party) no longer exist. The DPS and the People's Party were anti-Western oriented, while the pro-Montenegrin block and minority parties were pro-Western oriented.

Conflict with Milošević and the Beginning of the pro-Western Orientation of Montenegro (1996 – 2000)

This event, initiated by the then Prime Minister Đukanović, impacted the division of two important political parties. The first was the division of the ruling party DPS into two parties – DPS and SNP. DPS, with Đukanović, turned towards cooperation with the West and entered into a confrontation with Slobodan Milošević. SNP, a new party, formed from conservatives and supporters of Milošević, led by then President of Montenegro Momir Bulatović, later Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, who led his country into a war with NATO, preceded by war crimes committed by Serbian forces in Kosovo. The then pro-Serbian People's Party (NS) split, led to the creation of the Serbian People's Party (SNS), which later changed its name to the New Serbian Democracy (NOVA), whose leader would become Andrija Mandić. These two newly formed parties, SNP and SNS-NOVA, fully turned towards Milošević, and their leaders were in Milošević's federal government until his fall in 2000. From SNP, new parties later emerged, some of which have parliamentary status: The Democratic People's Party (DNP) in 2011, led by Milan Knežević, part of the Democratic Front, and Democratic Montenegro (DCG – Demokrate) in 2015, led by Aleksa Bečić. From the People's Party (NS), or later the New Serbian Democracy, the Demos, or later the United Montenegro, was formed. Leaders of all these parties opposed the pro-Western orientation of Montenegro and carried out strong anti-NATO activities. Constant divisions and party splits have impacted extremely poor interpersonal relations. Several small parties have emerged on this side, such as the Workers' Party (RP) and the True Montenegro Party (PCG), without any real voter support.

Independence Referendum (2006)

In 2006, Montenegro held a crucial independence referendum that determined the fate of the country's union with Serbia. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia and Montenegro formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) on 28 April 1992. However, many Montenegrins desired greater autonomy and full independence for their country. On 21 May 2006, Montenegrin citizens voted in the referendum, which required at least 55 percent of the votes in favor of independence to be considered valid. The result was 55.5 percent in favor of independence, narrowly surpassing the threshold. The result led to a declaration of independence on 3 June 2006, as Montenegro officially separated from the state union with Serbia. Montenegro's decision to become an independent nation indicated the end of the last political ties between the two countries that once comprised the former Yugoslavia.

The successful independence referendum had a profound impact on Montenegro's political scene. The newly independent Montenegro set its sights on forging stronger ties with the West, pursuing membership in international organizations such as NATO and the European Union. However, on the other hand, the 2006 Independence Referendum in Montenegro significantly deepened political polarization. The division between parties grew, making it difficult for changes in coalition arrangements. However, this new landscape created opportunities for the emergence of new parties that were not solely based on these divisions.

Civic-oriented parties began to form, such as the Movement for Changes (PzP) in 2006. Some members of PzP later established a new party with a similar ideology called Positive Montenegro (Pozitivna Crna Gora) in 2012. While this party eventually split and disappeared from the political scene, it paved the way for the creation of the United Reform Action (URA) movement in 2014. Some of the founding members of the URA in Montenegro were former members of Positive Montenegro. These new parties garnered support from the pro-Western voter base, which was critical of the Democratic Party of Socialists' (DPS) long rule. The emergence of these civic-oriented parties signaled a shift in Montenegro's political landscape, as they sought to challenge the traditional divisions that had previously defined the country's politics.⁸

NATO Membership of Montenegro (2017)

The path to Montenegro's NATO membership was marked by numerous challenges and controversies, which significantly influenced the country's political landscape. In the years leading up to its accession, Montenegro embarked on a series of political, economic, and defense reforms to meet the alliance's requirements. The accession process began in December 2009 when Montenegro was granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP), which serves as a roadmap for aspiring NATO members. Montenegro's efforts to align with NATO's principles, standards, and values culminated in the country receiving a formal invitation to join the alliance during the NATO Summit held in Warsaw in July 2016.

However, Montenegro's pursuit of NATO membership was met with considerable opposition, both domestically and from external actors. Domestically, Montenegrin society was divided over the issue, with pro-Western parties advocating for NATO membership, while pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties staunchly opposed it. Pro-Russian and pro-Serbian groups, backed by the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian media, organized protests and boycotts of

8 Zlatko Vujović, *Parlamentarni izbori u Crnoj Gori 2012 – Nastavak prevlasti socijalista i povratak Đukanovića* (Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro 2012 – Continuation of the Dominance of the Socialists and the Return of Đukanović), *Političke analize* br. 13, Zagreb: FPZG 2012.

parliamentary sessions to express their discontent with the government's pro-NATO stance.⁹ These forces not only opposed NATO membership but also called for the replacement of the Montenegrin government. Some pro-Western parties also participated in the protests and boycotts. URA declined to vote for Montenegro's entry into NATO and they justified this decision with the ongoing parliamentary boycott by the opposition at the time. SDP, which was in opposition at the same time and was actively participating in the parliamentary boycott, broke the boycott and voted for Montenegro's membership in NATO. Despite these differences, parties such as URA, the Democrats, and other political parties whose political stances are aligned with a pro-Serbian narrative, are currently expressing support for NATO. Externally, Russia was particularly vocal in its opposition to Montenegro's NATO membership, viewing it as an unwelcome expansion of the alliance's influence in the region. These events led to heightened tensions and further polarization within the Montenegrin society.

Despite the opposition and challenges, Montenegro officially joined NATO on 5 June 2017, becoming the 29th member of the alliance. The country's accession marked a significant milestone in its efforts to establish closer ties with Western institutions and solidify its commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. However, the political divisions and tensions that emerged during the NATO membership process continue to impact Montenegro's political landscape and its ongoing efforts to join the European Union.

Law on Religious Freedoms and Protests by Supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church (2019–2020)

The Law on Religious Freedoms, passed in Montenegro in December 2019, aimed to regulate the legal status of religious communities and their property. This law particularly affected the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), as it required religious organizations to prove ownership of properties built before 1918. Properties without clear ownership records would be registered as state property, but religious communities would still retain the right to use them. The law's passage led to widespread protests by supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Critics argued that the law targeted the SPC, and many saw it as an attempt to diminish the SPC's influence in Montenegro. The SPC and its supporters held protests and demanded the law's repeal, claiming it violated the rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its followers.

The protests were also fueled by tensions between Montenegrins who identify as ethnic Serbs and those who identify as Montenegrins. The issue of the church and its properties had become deeply intertwined with Montenegro's national identity and the relationship between Montenegro and Serbia. After the parliamentary elections in August 2020, which resulted in a change of government, the new ruling coalition announced its intention to amend the Law on Religious Freedoms to address the concerns of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its supporters. This decision demonstrated the significant impact of the protests on the political landscape in Montenegro. Since the 2020 elections, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) has become a crucial political actor with a decisive impact on political processes in Montenegro.¹⁰ The main political division is between parties aligned

9 Heather A. Conley / Matthew Melino, *Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro – The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics*, *Center for Strategic & International Studies* 2019, www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro

10 Mira Milošević, *Russia's Weaponization of Tradition – The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro*, *Center for Strategic & International Studies* 2020, www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-weaponization-tradition-case-orthodox-church-montenegro

with the SPC and other parties. Among the SPC-aligned parties, there are differences in terms of support from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and factions of the SPC that oppose the Serbian Patriarch and are critical of the Serbian President.

It is important noting that patriarchal of SPC seat is in Belgrade and represents national Serbian orthodox church that has under its jurisdiction, similar to the Russian Orthodox Church, territories of different states such as Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia, and formerly North Macedonia. However, the unresolved issue of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro remains a significant point of disagreement and the easiest way to explain its complexity is by going back to historical perspective. In Orthodoxy, the borders of national Orthodox churches typically correspond to state borders, making them distinct from the Catholic Church, where the Pope holds transnational authority. The issue of the SPC properties and the Law on Religious Freedoms in Montenegro is deeply rooted in the historical context of the region.

The tensions and conflicts surrounding this issue can be traced back to the early 20th century, when Montenegro was absorbed into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) in 1918. At that time, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CPC) was an autocephalous (independent) church, with its properties and assets. In the Kingdom of Montenegro, the state owned the properties, and the CPC had the right to use them. This arrangement persisted during the communist era and still exists today in Serbia. With the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the unification of the previously independent Orthodox churches, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church lost its autocephaly, and its properties were transferred to the newly formed Serbian Orthodox Church. This event laid the foundation for the current disputes over the ownership of church properties in Montenegro.

Throughout the 20th century, the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and Montenegrin authorities remained tense. The issue of property ownership became particularly contentious after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and Montenegro's restoration of independence in 2006. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church sought to regain its autocephaly and reclaim its historical properties, while the Serbian Orthodox Church maintained its claim to these assets. The historical context of the church property dispute is further complicated by the evolving national identities of the people in Montenegro. The Montenegrin population is divided between those who identify as ethnic Montenegrins and those who identify as ethnic Serbs. The Serbian Orthodox Church has a strong presence in Montenegro and is supported by many ethnic Serbs, while the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which remains unrecognized by other Orthodox churches, represents the aspirations of ethnic Montenegrins.

Considering this background, in 2019, the Montenegrin government introduced a law, endorsed by the Venice Commission, which stipulated that all properties managed by the SPC in Montenegro should be registered under the Montenegrin state, while allowing the SPC to continue using them. This law rekindled long-standing conflicts, leading the SPC to mobilize supporters through mass protests and obtain unofficial backing from some Western allies. The Law on Religious Freedoms was first amended by the 2020 parliamentary majority, but the Agreement was not signed during Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić's administration. Montenegro's parliament subsequently approved a motion of no confidence in Krivokapić's government due to internal coalition disagreements and tensions between the government and the parliament. In response, Dritan Abazović formed a minority government with the support of moderate pro-European and pro-Serbian parties, becoming the new Prime Minister. Abazović was the one who signed a "fundamental agreement" with the SPC, prompting several government coalition parties to announce a no-confidence motion, as it was going

against coalition agreement, and it was signed without any wider consultation and discussion. The motion was later supported by the Parliament, resulting in the collapse of the second government in a single year and intensifying Montenegro's political instability.

Deep-rooted Corruption

The prolonged rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its partners in Montenegro has fostered a deeply ingrained culture of corruption that has significantly impacted the political, economic, and social landscape of the country. Over the years, this corrupt system has generated widespread social dissatisfaction, which has been exploited by various forces, both internal and external, to further their own agendas. One of the main factors contributing to the persistence of corruption in Montenegro is the lack of strong and independent institutions that can hold the powerful accountable.¹¹ The DPS, which held power for three decades, managed to consolidate control over key institutions, including the judiciary, law enforcement, and the media. This concentration of power enabled the ruling elite to engage in widespread corruption and abuse of public resources with little to no oversight or consequences.¹² Additionally, clientelism and patronage have become deeply entrenched within the Montenegrin political system. The DPS and its partners have used public resources to build a vast network of loyal supporters, who, in turn, have been rewarded with public sector jobs, contracts, and other benefits. This system of patronage has created a culture of dependency, making it difficult for citizens to challenge the status quo and demand accountability from their leaders.

The change in government in 2020 presented a unique opportunity for Montenegro to address its long-standing corruption issues. However, the new government, comprising various parties with differing agendas, struggled to make significant progress in tackling corruption. Instead, they appeared to adopt the existing patterns of behavior of their predecessors, further entrenching the culture of corruption. The new government's inability to effectively address corruption has been demonstrated by a series of scandals involving high-ranking officials, including members of the prime minister's own party.¹³ Additionally, the ruling parties have engaged in widespread party hiring and abuse of state resources for political and electoral purposes,¹⁴ further eroding public trust in the political system.

During the two-year term of both governments (2020–2022), similarities with the previous administration emerged. The ruling parties (URA, SNP, DF, Democratic Montenegro, etc.) that assumed power after the 2020 elections also engaged in widespread party hiring and abuse of state resources for political and electoral purposes. The Anti-Corruption Agency reported that during the campaign for presidential elections, in a period of two months, more than 6,000 people were hired in public administration.¹⁵

11 Center for Monitoring and Research (CeMI), Public Opinion Survey – Anticorruption Policies and Citizen's Corrupted Practice, Podgorica 2023.

12 Same, Montenegro – A Captured State or a Leading Candidate for EU Accession?, Podgorica 2019.

13 <https://bizniscg.me/2022/12/23/novovic-10-odsto-zaplijenjenih-cigareta-unisteno-90-odsto-završavao-na-crnom-trzistu/>

14 CeMI, Policy Study – Abuse of State Resources in Montenegro, Podgorica 2022.

15 [www.antikorupcija.me/me/analitika/jres/zaposljavanje/data?f=\(dd,2023-03-20\)\(do,2023-01-16\)](http://www.antikorupcija.me/me/analitika/jres/zaposljavanje/data?f=(dd,2023-03-20)(do,2023-01-16))

Foreign Interference in the Political and Election Process

Even though Russia was among the first countries to recognize Montenegrin independence, after which socio-economic ties were strengthened, relations have abruptly changed after the decision of the government of Montenegro to join NATO. One of the explanations for this shift was the Montenegrin government's decision to decline the Russian request to install a naval base in Montenegro, and as it was later explained, "Lacking a reliable port in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia's strategic capability in the region is limited".¹⁶ As it was later observed in Ukraine, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs interpreted NATO's invitation to Montenegro to join the alliance as openly provocative and directly affecting the interests of Russia, which is forcing them to react and protect their interest.

At that time, Russia had only one base in the Mediterranean Sea – Tartus – which served as the navy's sole repair and replenishment port. With other countries denying access to their ports, Montenegro's ports gained strategic importance. This was especially significant considering the events that unfolded before the war in Syria and Russia's involvement in protecting the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Montenegro's refusal to accommodate Russia's request made it crucial for Moscow to establish a pro-Russian, anti-Western government in Podgorica as part of its strategy to thwart greater Western engagement in its perceived sphere of influence.¹⁷ During and after this process, Russia's main strategic goal had been to "foster national division amongst the population and stop Montenegro from joining the NATO alliance".¹⁸ However, since this attempt was unsuccessful, Russia continued weakening the Montenegrin state and institutions to discredit a NATO country by increasing influence over the pro-Serbian population in Montenegro and presenting Russia as a great guardian by using two soft power mechanisms: The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the media.¹⁹ However, targeting a NATO country could cause a stronger response and significant consequences. Russia's strategy to influence perceptions within Montenegro directly engages the concept of Montenegrin national identity. At stake in these narratives and representation of Montenegrins as a part of the Serbian nation is a negation of Montenegrin identity, culture, and history.²⁰ However, it should be noted that following Montenegro's independence, Russia became the largest investor in the country, primarily investing in the aluminum industry, tourism, and real estate.

Another mechanism for spreading disinformation and misinformation in Montenegro involves media outlets and social media. The dissemination of disinformation and misinformation can lead to a range of consequences, such as undermining democracies, eroding trust in democratic institutions and processes, polarizing debates, fostering mistrust and confusion, and exacerbating existing societal divisions. In essence, disinformation disrupts the flow of accurate information by inundating a communication ecology with false messages.²¹ Taking into account all the internal and external factors contributing to affective polarization in Montenegro, a multi-party system characterized by an underdeveloped

16 Reuf Bajrović / Vesko Garčević / Richard Kraemer, *Hanging by a Thread – Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro*, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Washington 2018.

17 Ibid, p. 6.

18 Milošević, op. cit., p. 2.

19 Ana Nenezić / Miloš Vuković, *The Analysis of Business Conditions and Business Barriers of the Media Industry in Montenegro*, *Media Association of South-East Europe (MASE) 2020*, <https://masee.org/index.php/business/205-the-analysis-of-business-conditions-and-business-barriers-of-the-media-industry-in-montenegro>

20 *Digital Forensic Center*, *Russia's Role in the Balkans – The Case of Montenegro*, Podgorica 2021.

21 W. Lance Bennett / Steven Livingston, *The Disinformation Order – Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions*, in: *European Journal of Communication* 33 (2) 2018, pp. 122 – 139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>

transitional democracy, with ethnicity, ideology, and religion serving as political polarization identifiers can be observed in the country. In a society deeply polarized along national lines, this issue is particularly concerning.²²

Montenegro has imposed sanctions and supported the restrictive measures of the Council of the European Union²³ against Russia after two previous unsuccessful attempts, due to disagreements and differing views among members of the Montenegrin Government.²⁴ Following this decision, Montenegro experienced an unprecedented series of cyberattacks on government servers.²⁵ The coordinated attack began in August 2022 and placed Montenegro's critical infrastructure, including banking, water, and electricity systems, at significant risk. Montenegro requested assistance from NATO member states to restore the government's computer system and gather evidence about the attackers' identity.

Regarding direct involvement in election processes, one of the first initiatives of the pro-Serbian government led by Prime Minister Krivokapić in 2021 aimed to simplify the process of obtaining Montenegrin citizenship and voting rights for many individuals of Serbian nationality residing in Montenegro. This could not only impact the overall population structure but also the outcome of future elections, as Montenegro would likely lose its pro-Western majority within the electorate.²⁶ This plan was temporarily abandoned following protests from pro-Montenegrin activists, but the outgoing government adopted regulations before its term ended, allowing for this possibility.

Political Instability

In the 32 years following the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1990, Montenegro has experienced 14 different governments. These governments were predominantly led by Prime Ministers from the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). All Prime Ministers until 2020 were affiliated with the DPS, even though the party only held an absolute majority of parliamentary seats from 1990 to 1997. Subsequently, the DPS governed through broader coalitions, and from 2001 to 2002, a minority government comprised of the DPS-SDP was supported by the Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSCG).

The DPS and its traditional partners lost power following the elections in August 2020. The diverse new parliamentary majority struggled to form a stable government, leading to the collapse of two governments within the first two years of the parliamentary term. Consequently, early elections are scheduled to take place in June 2023.

22 Ana Nenezić, Ethnonational Affective Polarization as a Mediator of pro-National Media on Political Misperception in Montenegro, 2022, <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/94020/NenezicAnaResearch.pdf?sequence=1>

23 EU response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/timeline-eu-response-ukraine-invasion/

24 European Commission, Montenegro 2022 Report, Strasbourg, 12 October 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2022_en

25 AP News, Montenegro Wrestles with Massive Cyberattack, Russia Blamed, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nato-technology-hacking-religion-5c2bd851027b56a77eaf9385b7d5d741>

26 Bojan Bugarin, Montenegrin Citizenship and Domicile: How to Get to an up-to-Date Central Voter Register, *CeMI*, Podgorica 2021.

Table 2: Prime Ministers and Presidents in Montenegro and Their Party Affiliations since 1990

Elections	Premier	Party	Position in the party	President of the Republic	Party	Position in the party
1990, 1992, 1996	Milo Đukanović	DPS	Vice-president	Momir Bulatović	DPS (1990–1996) SNP (1996–97)	President
1998, 2001	Filip Vujanović	DPS	Vice-president	Milo Đukanović	DPS	President
2002	Milo Đukanović	DPS	President		DPS	
2003				Filip Vujanović	DPS	Vice-president
2006	Željko Šturanović	DPS	Vice-president			
2008	Milo Đukanović ²⁷	DPS	President	Filip Vujanović	DPS	Vice-president
2009	Milo Đukanović	DPS	President			
2010	Igor Lukšić	DPS	Vice-president			
2012	Milo Đukanović	DPS	President			
2013				Filip Vujanović	DPS	Vice-president
2016	Duško Marković	DPS	Vice-president			
2018				Milo Đukanović	DPS	President
2020	Zdravko Krivokapić	(DF)	N/A			N/A
2022	Dritan Abazović	URA	President			President
2023				Jakov Milatović	Europe Now	Vice-president

Source: Vujović / Tomović 2019,²⁸ updated by the authors

27 After the Prime Minister Željko Šturanović resigned due to health reasons, Đukanović was proposed as the candidate for the position, and he was officially re-elected as Prime Minister on 29 February 2008.

28 Zlatko Vujović / Nikola Tomović, The Presidentialisation of Political Parties in the Western Balkans: The Presidentialisation of Political Parties in Montenegro – A Limited Semi-presidentialism, Palgrave Macmillan 2019, available at: www.researchgate.net/publication/342549877_The_Presidentialisation_of_Political_Parties_in_the_Western_Balkans_The_Presidentialisation_of_Political_Parties_in_Montenegro_-_A_Limited_Semi-presidentialism

Table 3: **Post-Electoral Ruling Coalitions and Parties in Montenegro**

Elections	Ruling party/coalitions
1990	DPS
1992 (until 1993, concentration government)	DPS, NS, LSCG & SDPR
1992 (since 1993)	DPS
1996	DPS
1998	DPS, NS & SDP
2001 (minority government)	DPS & SDP (supported by LSCG)
2002	DPS & SDP
2006	DPS, SDP & DUA
2009	DPS, SDP, DUA & HGI
2012	DPS, SDP, BS, LP & HGI
2016	DPS, SDP, BS, LP, HGI & DUA
2020	DF, DCG, SNP, URA, UCG, PCG,RP
2022 (minority government)	URA, SNP, SDP, BS, DP, AA (supported by DPS, SD)

Source: Vujović / Tomović 2019,²⁹ updated by the authors

The Zdravko Krivokapić Government 2020 to 2022 – “Government of the 12 Apostles”

Following the 2020 parliamentary elections, Montenegro experienced two government shifts. Both lost votes of confidence during the current parliamentary term, and the existing government, led by Dritan Abazović, has been serving more as a technical administration than a political one. Firstly, Montenegro saw the formation of Zdravko Krivokapić’s government. Krivokapić, the leader of the “For the Future of Montenegro” coalition, was primarily backed by the Democratic Front (DF) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). Interestingly, Krivokapić was reportedly the SPC’s representative within the coalition list. The Krivokapić government faced intense pressure from Western representatives to exclude pro-Russian DF ministers. Consequently, the government was formed with non-party officials, apart from Vice President Dritan Abazović. This government, which was officially presented as a government of experts, was also referred to as the “Government of the 12 Apostles” due to its religious undertones. The name “12 Apostles” was given by Krivokapić himself, and it refers to the fact that all members of the government, except for Abazović, were Orthodox Christians and followers of the SPC. Political parties, including the pro-Russian DF and Democratic Montenegro, were granted numerous lower-level positions beneath the ministerial level.

The Krivokapić government's downfall can be attributed to a lack of support from the MPs who initially voted for it, due to internal coalition disagreements and tensions between the government and the parliament. The government eventually collapsed when Abazović, backed by strong support from Western partners, decided to form a minority government without the DF. This move aimed to facilitate several judicial appointments, which required either a 2/3 or 3/5 majority vote, in order to restart negotiations with the EU. During its term, the Krivokapić government faced multiple challenges and complexities. The strong influence of the SPC, combined with the exclusion of pro-Russian DF ministers, contributed to internal divisions and an unstable political atmosphere. Furthermore, the heterogeneous composition of the coalition made it difficult for the government to effectively address pressing issues or to achieve substantial progress in its reform agenda. Ultimately, these factors culminated in the government's collapse and the formation of the subsequent Abazović government.

The Dritan Abazović Government (2022): A Minority-supported Government and its Challenges

The Abazović government was established with the backing of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and the Social Democrats (SD). While DPS did not have ministerial positions, their representatives assumed lower-ranking roles within the executive branch. The government's composition included eight positions for the United Reform Action (URA) in conjunction with CIVIS and their selected experts, six positions for the pro-Serbian Socialist People's Party (SNP), two positions for the pro-Western Social Democratic Party (SDP), and two positions each for the Albanian and Bosniak parties. The government's primary agenda centered on the swift appointment of judges to the Constitutional Court, the Supreme State Prosecutor, and members of the Judicial Council. These appointments were intended to pave the way for achieving the final benchmarks necessary to conclude negotiations on Montenegro's EU membership, with accession anticipated in 2024.

Following the government's formation, Prime Minister Abazović made a surprising shift in priorities by announcing that the first issue to be addressed would be the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). Abazović obtained a majority of votes for this decision from his URA ministers and the pro-Serbian SNP. This controversial decision was announced just prior to a high-level EU foreign policy representative's visit to Podgorica, where a significant number of EU ministers were expected for the Stabilization and Association Council meeting between the EU and Montenegro. Rather than a diplomatic success, the conference saw EU member states represented at the ambassadorial or lower levels.

In response to the government's decision to adopt the Fundamental Agreement with the SPC, which contradicted the coalition agreement, several civic and national minority parties (DPS, SDP, SD, DUA) withdrew their support for the government. Consequently, a vote of no confidence was passed in the Parliament, leading to the government's collapse after only 115 days in power. Despite this short tenure, the government continued to function for nearly seven months under a technical mandate, lasting almost twice as long as its regular political mandate.

The State's Unstable Financial Situation amid the Populist Wave: The Rise of the "Europe Now" Movement

The political crisis in Montenegro is further exacerbated by the growing support for a new political party called Movement Europe Now (Pokret Evropa sad). Led by two ministers from Zdravko Krivokapić's government, the party adopted the name of Krivokapić's government economic program. The program aimed to increase employees' net wages by exempting employers from paying health contributions for workers, thus raising net salaries while maintaining the same gross amount. Additionally, the program proposed an 80 percent increase in the minimum monthly salary and an increase of national average salary of over 40 percent. Although these measures did not save Krivokapić's government, they instigated a series of wage increases enacted by the Abazović government to counter the new party's popularity. Consequently, it is projected that the salaries of nearly all public servants will increase by approximately 50 percent in 2023 compared to 2021, with some sectors, such as state universities, experiencing increases of 70–80 percent. The minimum wage for civil servants and employees was raised from 250 to 450 EUR net, and the average salary increased from 530 to 700 EUR net.³⁰

The increase in public expenditures was not backed by systemic reforms or higher budgetary income but rather by loans obtained from commercial banks. The most recent loan was secured from Deutsche Bank, featuring a 5.9 percent+ EURIBOR interest rate and a one-time processing fee of 1.35 percent. Movement Europe Now is further expanding its commitments by proposing to nearly double the minimum pension and further increase salaries. The financial situation would be even more critical if the salary increases were not accompanied by extremely high inflation, which contributed to the growth in budgetary income, and if they had not coincided with the initiation of electronic fiscalization, which facilitated better tax compliance.

Various public opinion polls reveal that this new party has a growing national support exceeding 20 percent. It is a centralist-populist movement seeking to attract a large number of citizens by promising unstoppable salary and pension increases without addressing how to halt the state's continuous debt accumulation, which covers massive state budget expenditures. Originating from Zdravko Krivokapić's "apostolic" government, the party maintains strong ties with a faction of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In public appearances, they avoid complex topics and revert to unrealistic promises of new measures for salary and pension growth. In the presidential elections, Miloško Spajić, the president of the Movement Europe Now party, faced disqualification as a candidate due to his illegal possession of both Montenegrin and Serbian citizenship. Montenegro does not have a dual citizenship agreement with Serbia, and Spajić was caught making false claims, as he publicly stated that he did not have Serbian citizenship or dual permanent residency in Montenegro and Serbia. Spajić did not appeal the State Election Commission's decision or to the Constitutional Court; instead, his deputy, Jakov Milatović, entered the presidential race.

The outcome of the presidential elections, in which Movement Europe Now and its president Spajić were initially considered favorites, had a significant influence on the future of this party. Milatović's victory in the elections, with almost 60 percent of votes, despite the controversy surrounding Spajić, marked a turning point for the party and Montenegro's political landscape. Interestingly, Milatović, during his campaign, criticized Đukanović for

30 Parliament of Montenegro, speech of the President, accessed at: www.skupstina.me/en/articles/mr-becic-i-am-proud-that-citizens-will-enjoy-benefits-of-december-sitting

holding both the presidency of Montenegro and the presidency of DPS simultaneously, arguing that it prevented him from being a president for all citizens. However, after his own election as President of Montenegro, Milatović chose not to resign from his position within the party, thus continuing the same practice he had previously denounced. This decision was likely made to maintain control within the party, especially as Spajić, the party's president, is seen as a potential future prime minister of Montenegro.

The Unsuccessful Attempt to Form a Third Government

Despite the expectation that the fall of the Abazović government would lead to the formation of a new government or the announcement of elections, neither outcome materialized after the vote of no confidence. The ruling majority adopted amendments to the existing Law on the President,³¹ which curbed the President's power, enabling a majority of MPs to propose a prime minister-designate even if the President refuses to propose a candidate. However, these attempts to form a new government within the current parliament were met with criticism from the EU and the United States, who warned that the ongoing crisis could threaten Montenegro's path to EU membership and weaken its relations with allies.

An additional problem arose from the fact that the Constitutional Court, which should be assessing national legislation against national constitutional norms, was currently paralyzed due to a lack of quorum. The Montenegrin Parliament has failed to elect the four missing judges of the Court because political parties were unwilling to compromise, which would enable the parliament to reach the required qualified majority. Moreover, the Parliament not only has the election of constitutional court judges stalled, but the election of lay members of the Judicial Council has also not occurred. These were both essential „safeguard institutions“. The adoption of these amendments came after Montenegro's President Đukanović did not grant a mandate to any of the potential candidates, as none of them provided written evidence of majority support in parliament within the constitutionally prescribed deadline. Consequently, Đukanović proposed that the parliament shorten its own mandate to facilitate early elections.

This decision further escalated the political crisis, prompting the ruling majority to pass amendments to the Law on the President, which contradicted the Venice Commission's recommendations.^{32,33} The amendments allowed the parliamentary majority or the Speaker of the Parliament to propose a prime minister-designate to the Parliament. Previously, only the President of Montenegro held this authority. The Speaker of the Parliament, invoking this new legal right, declared a prime minister-designate based on the revised preferences of the parliamentary majority, bypassing the President of Montenegro's decision. However, the parliamentary majority failed to reach a consensus on a new government, as URA and SNP no longer supported prime minister-designate Miodrag Lekić. Abazović then proposed himself as a new prime minister-designate, even though his URA had supported Lekić just two months prior. This proposal also failed, as it did not garner the support of the necessary 41 MPs.

31 Official Gazette of Montenegro 42/18 and 140/22.

32 CDL-PI(2022)048-e Montenegro – Urgent Opinion on the Law on Amendments to the Law on the President of Montenegro, issued on 9 December 2022 pursuant to Article 14a of the Venice Commission's Rules of Procedure, available at [www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-PI\(2022\)048-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-PI(2022)048-e)

33 The Venice Commission recommended not to adopt the amendments, and therefore not to adopt the Law on Amendments to the Law on the President until the Constitutional Court has become fully operational and can be asked to assess its constitutionality after its adoption.

With this, all the prerequisites under the law had been met for Đukanović to dissolve the parliament and call early elections, especially at a time when Montenegro has a functional Constitutional Court.

New Elections – The End or Escalation of Crisis

The presidential elections took place on 19 March 2023, with a second round held for the first time since 1997 on 2 April 2023. A candidate had to receive half the votes of those who voted in the first round to be elected. The former President of Montenegro, Đukanović, entered the second round, while the second candidate was decided between the leader of the pro-Russian and pro-Serbian DF Andrija Mandić, a staunch critic of the West and opponent of Montenegrin independence, and the populist candidate Jakov Milatović, the second-ranking member of the new party Movement Europe Now. In the second round, Milatović ultimately emerged victorious with 58.8 percent of the votes, while Đukanović received 41.1 percent, marking a turning point in Montenegro's political landscape. Due to the parliamentary majority failing to elect a new government within the 90-day legal deadline, President Đukanović dissolved the assembly and scheduled early parliamentary elections for 11 June 2023, on the 17th anniversary of independence.

Holding early parliamentary elections will complicate the campaign between the candidates of the ruling majority and Movement Europe Now. These three candidates counted on the votes of parties that won 41 mandates in the 2020 elections. According to CeMI's research, among those who would vote for Movement Europe Now, every other person voted for the coalition led by DF in 2020, every third for the Democratic Montenegro, and every 10th for URA. Thus, Movement Europe Now represents the main threat to the three ruling coalitions. In a situation where other parties in Montenegro are losing support to Europe Now, they may face a strategic dilemma ahead of the new parliamentary elections. They could choose to attack Europe Now in an attempt to regain voters or maintain a more moderate stance to keep the possibility of a coalition with Europe Now alive.

If a party believes that it can win back voters by attacking Europe Now's policies, highlighting their potential flaws, or presenting alternative policy proposals, it might choose to adopt a more confrontational approach. This strategy could involve criticizing Europe Now's populist policies, questioning their sustainability, or presenting themselves as a more responsible and reliable alternative. On the other hand, parties that see potential benefits in forming a coalition with Europe Now might adopt a more cautious approach. They could focus on areas of common ground or shared policy objectives while trying to maintain good relations. In this case, they might avoid direct confrontation and instead emphasize their willingness to work together for the benefit of Montenegro.

From an opposition standpoint, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in Montenegro is facing significant challenges after the resignation of Milo Đukanović, a dominant figure in Montenegrin politics who has been in power since the early 1990s. With new parliamentary elections scheduled in just two months, the DPS must quickly and effectively manage a leadership transition, address internal challenges, and develop a strong campaign strategy to succeed. In addition to the challenges of managing a leadership transition and addressing internal party issues, the DPS is also coping with the recent loss at the presidential elections. The defeat of the DPS candidate to a Europe Now candidate by a margin of 40:60 has highlighted the level of polarization in Montenegrin society. This loss has also raised questions about the party's ability to maintain its traditional voter base

and attract new supporters. Consequently, the DPS is under immense pressure to regroup and develop a strategy that will enable it to compete effectively in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

To maintain its position of power, the DPS will need to select a new leader who can unite the party and effectively communicate its vision to the public. However, leadership changes can lead to internal divisions within a party, which may pose challenges to maintaining unity. Therefore, how the party manages these challenges will be critical for its future success. In light of the leadership transition and upcoming elections, the DPS could consider an alternative approach to alliances and partnerships by nominating a non-partisan, independent leader for the elections. This strategy could broaden the party's appeal, restore public trust, and present a fresh perspective to the electorate. With an independent leader at the helm, the DPS may be more likely to attract support from other political parties, civil society organizations, or prominent individuals who share similar policy objectives. This broader coalition could help strengthen the party's electoral prospects and increase its chances of forming a government after the elections.

By nominating a non-partisan, independent leader for the elections, the DPS can present itself as a forward-looking, inclusive party that is committed to addressing the needs and concerns of all Montenegrins. This strategy may help the party regain public trust, broaden its appeal, and improve its electoral prospects in the upcoming parliamentary elections, especially considering that the party has been losing voters constantly since the last parliamentary elections in 2020. Overall, the DPS will need to act quickly and efficiently to navigate the leadership transition and address internal challenges.

In conclusion, the upcoming early parliamentary elections in Montenegro hold significant implications not only for the country's domestic political landscape but also for its foreign policy orientation and European integration process. The choices made by the Montenegrin electorate in these pivotal elections will determine the course of the nation's political, economic, and security trajectories for years to come.

Throughout this article, we have examined the complex political dynamics at play, including the various conflicts and interests that shape the Montenegrin political scene. The political crisis has been marked by a series of events, such as the vote of no confidence in the Krivokapić and Abazović government, the role of SPC in these political processes, the amendments to the Law on President, the struggles over the formation of a new government, and the role of the Constitutional Court, which have all contributed to the complex and turbulent state of affairs.

Outlook

As the parliamentary elections approach, two distinct paths for Montenegro's future are emerging. On the one hand, a pro-Western government would focus on unblocking the European integration process, solidifying the country's commitment to the EU and its NATO membership, and ensuring a stable and prosperous future in alignment with European values and standards. On the other hand, the success of national, clerical, and populist parties, backed by Belgrade and Moscow, could lead to a political landscape characterized by stronger ties with Eastern powers, a shift away from European integration, and a potentially unstable position within the NATO alliance.

Ultimately, the choice between these paths will be made by the people of Montenegro through their votes in the parliamentary elections. It is essential for the international community to remain vigilant and supportive of Montenegro's democratic processes and institutions during this crucial period. In doing so, the world can help ensure that the will of the Montenegrin people is respected and that the country moves forward on a path that guarantees its long-term stability, prosperity, and security within the broader European and global contexts.



Election posters of the presidential candidates before the runoff election on 2 April 2023 in Montenegro (l. Jakov Milatović, r. Milo Đukanović). Foto: Megan Nagel, Podgorica 2023