

Montenegro: A New Government Amidst Political Fragmentation

Executive Summary

- Montenegro's new government emerged after lengthy and unpredictable negotiations, bringing together parties of diverse ideological backgrounds, with the relatively new party, Europe Now (established in 2022), being its main pillar. This article represents the trajectory of formation of the government and the first hints of its functioning until early December 2023.
- The key parliamentary support is provided by parties, known for their close relationships with the regimes in Serbia and Russia, despite not taking ministerial positions. This raised many questions towards the new prime minister Milojko Spajić, who reaffirms his commitment to EU integration and the country's NATO membership, arguing that no concessions regarding these matters will be made.
- With the Democratic Party of Socialists losing its grip on power, the political landscape has changed significantly. Consensus building and power sharing are difficult to achieve but at the same time are of paramount importance if Montenegro wants to unblock its EU path and restore much needed political stability.

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Introduction: Formation of a New Government in the Context of a Changing Political Landscape

Due to shifts in the political landscape and the relatively inconclusive results of the parliamentary elections in Montenegro conducted in June 2023, the formation of the government was prolonged. The elections did not bring a convincing majority for any of the political actors and it took a record 83 days for the new government to be formed, almost breaking the legally prescribed deadline of 90 days.¹

With many plot twists during the negotiations, the government was eventually formed with the support of 46 MPs out of a total of 81. Milojko Spajić, leader of the Europe Now Movement, managed to gather support from most of the MPs of his own electoral list. However, three MPs of the Europe Now list openly disagreed with the negotiation process. The Democrats, a party run by Aleksa Bečić, also voted in favour of Spajić's programme, along with parties of the Albanian national minority, the Socialist People's Party and the coalition For the Future of Montenegro. The latter is headed by constituents of the former Democratic Front, a pro-Russian political player known for its close relations to Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić. The coalition provided support to the new government, although formally not occupying ministerial posts. Instead, its leader Andrija Mandić was appointed president of the parliament. For the Future of Montenegro also received positions at the level of state secretaries in several ministries (a political position just below the minister) and was additionally promised numerous board positions in the country's public institutions and enterprises. The agreement on the formation of the government foresees its reshuffling by the end of 2024, by which four ministerial posts and one vice-prime ministership will be allocated to the Future of Montenegro.² To alleviate the concerns about the po-

tential impact of an alliance with For the Future of Montenegro on the country's NATO obligations and foreign policy, the agreement included pledges to advance Montenegro's EU accession, maintain an active and credible NATO membership, and to continue cooperation with all countries recognised by Montenegro.³ Still, critics highlight potential stumbling blocks for the coalition, such as sanctions against Russia or the cooperation with Kosovo, as "countries recognised by Montenegro" (see footnote 3) were not specified in the agreement.

Spajić's programme promises an increase of average income and pensions, as well as economic growth. However, analysts note that his programme is not based on concrete numbers.⁴ More emphasis was given on rule of law and justice, promising numerous initiatives, including the establishment of the Special Court for High Corruption and Organised Crime Cases and an upgrade of the Special Police Department into an agency which would be independent from the police administration and the Ministry of Interior.⁵ With regard to the pending population census, which has been traditionally a cause of heated political debates in the country due to the prevailing ethno-political cleavages, Spajić expressed readiness to compromise with the opposition, led by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS).

The New Context: The Political Landscape After 2020

The reason for this lengthy and burdensome government formation lies within the country's political landscape, which has undergone significant shifts over the recent years. Since the defeat of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in 2020 after thirty years in government, the political camps have reshuffled. At this point, only one thing seems certain: the political monopoly of the formerly predominant party, the DPS,

- 1 The shortest period for forming the government, following the restoration of Montenegrin independence in 2006, was six days, in 2010, under the prime minister-designate Igor Lukšić. The average time was 36 days, according to data presented by the NGO Centre for Civic Education.
- 2 The reconstruction of the government implies that the political entities New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People's Party from the Future of Montenegro coalition propose candidates for the following members of the government: Deputy Prime Minister for Infrastructure, Minister of Transport, Minister of Education, Minister of Tourism, and Minister of Spatial Planning and Urbanism.
- 3 The agreement in this part reads: "We agree that the foreign policy orientation of the 44th Government will be based on full commitment to EU integration and the accelerated process of Montenegro's accession to the EU, active and credible membership of Montenegro in NATO, further development of friendly cooperation with all countries recognized by Montenegro, and strengthening the role of our country in multilateral initiatives and organizations. The government will remain committed to the complete alignment of foreign policy with the foreign and security policy of the European Union, while respecting all internationally assumed obligations and agreements". See: *Radio Televizija Nikšić* (October 2023), Ovo je tekst finalnog sporazuma o formiranju nove vlasti, <https://rtnk.me/politika/ovo-je-tekst-finalnog-sporazuma-o-formiranju-nove-vlasti/> (accessed 14.12.2023).
- 4 *Vijesti online* (October 2023), Fidelity o ekspozeu Spajića: Ne pominju se prosječna plata od 1.000 eura, penzija od 600..., <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/679328/fidelity-o-ekspozeu-spajica-ne-pominju-se-prosječna-plata-od-1-000-eura-penzija-od-600> (accessed 14.12.2023).
- 5 Program and Proposal for the Composition of the 44th Government of Montenegro – Exposé of the Representative for the Composition of the Government, Milojko Spajić, 26.10.2023, <https://zakoni.skupstina.me/zakoni/web/dokumenta/zakoni-i-drugi-akti/5/3180-18214-00-33-23-1-1.pdf> (accessed 14.12.2023).

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has vanished. However, this process of de-monopolisation has neither been linear nor simple. The lengthy rule of the DPS was marked by allegations of corruption and entanglement in organised crime. Simultaneously, the party presented itself as key guarantor of political stability both to domestic and international audiences. Despite repeated attempts of newly formed parties to bridge the cleavage over Montenegro's statehood and identity, the political landscape before and after restoration of Montenegrin independence in 2006 remained largely divided into two camps: the pro-independence bloc, headed by the DPS, allied with Bosniak, Albanian and Croat minority parties, and the bloc dominated by parties with a Serbian outlook, as well as splinters of the Socialist People's Party, which broke away from the DPS in 1997, when Milo Đukanović shifted away from supporting Slobodan Milošević.

Since 2020, this old party system is being challenged. Two governments were formed and lost confidence since then. They were both formed in an atypical manner: The first government of Zdravko Krivokapić comprised personalities previously unknown in politics. The successive minority government of Dritan Abazović was voted in with support by the DPS, which did not assume any ministerial posts. The only constant in government formations since 2020 has been that the Social Democrats, considered a close affiliate of the DPS, have remained in opposition throughout.

Abazović's government lost a vote of no confidence in August 2022. Due to the violation of constitutional obligations and legal exhibitionism by President Đukanović,⁶ the government continued to perform functions in a care-taker mandate for more than a year. This political puzzle and ping-pong between various governments and parliamentary majorities resulted in a severe crisis of political accountability. Tensions were increased by the fact that the longtime leader of the DPS, Milo Đukanović, remained president of Montenegro until his defeat in April 2023 against Jakov Milatović, a former minister of Zdravko Krivokapić's government.

In the context of high political instability, a new relevant political party emerged, formally established in

June 2022: Europe Now, named after the reform programme of the Krivokapić government. The party was established by former non-party-affiliated ministers in the government of Zdravko Krivokapić: Miloško Spajić, who headed the finance ministry, and Jakov Milatović, who managed the portfolio of economic development. In late 2021, they publicly presented the Europe Now reform programme, which promised to increase minimum and average wages through a tax reform. Although it was criticised for being rushed and for a lack of thorough regulatory impact assessment and public debate, the programme was adopted shortly before the entire government was toppled in early 2022. The no-confidence motion was supported by the opposition, composed of the DPS, Liberal Party, Social Democrats, Social Democratic Party, Bosniak party, and Albanian parties, as well as United Reform Action (URA), a junior partner in government headed by Dritan Abazović and its coalition partner CIVIS.⁷ URA played an important role in the aftermath of the 2020 elections. It agreed to form a government without the DPS despite pressures by the DPS and its allies not to align with exponents of the "Serbian world", a term which suggests aspirations of Serbia's government to expand control beyond Serbian borders.

Despite the fall of Krivokapić's government, Spajić and Milatović appropriated the reform programme, capitalising on its popularity by establishing a party under the same name. Notwithstanding the criticism that the reform programme increased inflationary risks, it achieved to increase minimum wages from 250 EUR to 450 EUR, and consequently average wages from 530 EUR to almost 700 EUR within a few months after the programme was implemented. In local elections held in the capital Podgorica in October 2022, just a few months after its establishment, Europe Now won 21 per cent of votes and emerged as the strongest party in the new local government.⁸

On the wave of this popularity, Miloško Spajić, the party's head, decided to run in the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for March 2023. However, his candidacy was declined after media reported that he had obtained Serbian citizenship in 2009, which is a violation of the ban on dual citizenship stipulated in

6 After the no-confidence vote in August 2022, President Đukanović declined to nominate a prime minister-designate, although the constitution obliges him to make such a nomination. The parties that won the 2020 parliamentary elections tried to reunite to form the 44th government by circumventing the constitution through rewriting the competences of the president, but these attempts failed.

7 *Radio Slobodna Evropa* (February 2022), Izglasano nepovjerenje Vladi Zdravka Krivokapića, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-vlada-krivokapic-skupstina-smjena/31685479.html> (accessed 10.08.2023).

8 *Portal Analitika* (October 2023), Podgorica: "Svi za naš grad" 24 mandata, "Evropa sad" 13, DF 11, SNP ispod cenzusa, <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/preliminarni-rezultati-svi-za-nas-grad-421-odsto-evropa-sad-203-snp-ispod-cenzusa> (accessed 30.08.2023).

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Montenegrin Citizenship Law.⁹ In a move which was criticised as selective and not based on due procedures, the State Electoral Commission (SEC), a body predominantly composed of political representatives, decided to ask the Ministry of Interior of Serbia to confirm Spajić's citizenship. Serbian authorities responded affirmatively to this request, despite the fact that they did not reply to similar previous inquiries by their Montenegrin counterparts. Following this response, the SEC decided not to approve Spajić's candidacy by majority of votes, including from both the DPS and Democratic Front representatives. Europe Now then decided that instead of Spajić, Jakov Milatović, the deputy president of the party, would run. In the first round of the elections Đukanović failed to reach a majority of votes, making Milatović's victory in the

second round more probable, as Europe Now, with a focus on economic issues, managed to bridge cleavages within the population between ethnic Serbian and Montenegrin voters. These expectations proved accurate: Milatović achieved a landslide victory with almost 59 per cent of votes in the second round of the presidential elections.¹⁰

Presidential elections were soon followed by parliamentary elections. Below the author provides a list of key contenders and their topics. With the fragmentation of the political scene and a relatively large number of political parties, they typically group together in coalitions or joint electoral lists, which was again the case in the most recent elections, as none of the most relevant parties ran independently.

June 2023 Parliamentary Elections: Key Contenders and Topics

Name of Electoral List	Key Constituents	Leader of the List	Mandates won
Europe Now (In Montenegrin: "Evropa sad")	Comprised of representatives of Europe Now, two independent candidates, the association of citizens CIVIS, United Montenegro, Party of Justice and Reconciliation, Alternative (informal group of citizens) and Novska lista (representing citizens from the coastal town of Herceg Novi).	Milojko Spajić , president of Europe Now	24
Together – For the Future That Belongs To You (In Montenegrin "Zajedno – Za budućnost koja ti pripada")	Headed by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), joined by the Social Democrats, Liberal Party and the Democratic Union of Albanians.	Danijel Živković , who took over the presidency of the DPS following Đukanović's resignation	21
For the Future of Montenegro (In Montenegrin: "Za budućnost Crne Gore")	Comprised of representatives of New Serbian Democracy, the Democratic People's Party and the Workers' Party.	Milan Knežević , president of the Democratic People's Party	13
Count Bravely! (In Montenegrin: "Hrabro se broji")	Comprised of Democrats and URA (United Reform Action).	Aleksa Bečić , president of the Democrats	11
For You (In Montenegrin: "Za tebe")	Comprised of the Socialist People's Party and DEMOS.	Vladimir Joković , president of the Socialist People's Party	2

Europe Now!

Europe Now ran within a wider coalition. Its rather diverse electoral list included party representatives, but also representatives of CIVIS (an association of citizens which in the 2020 elections was in an electoral coalition with Abazović's URA), United Montenegro (whose leader was once a member of the Democratic Front), the Party of Justice and Reconciliation, the Alternative

(an informal group of citizens) and Novska lista (representing a group of citizens from the coastal town of Herceg Novi). In addition to that, it included two independent candidates, a retired police officer and former security advisor of Dritan Abazović, who resigned the post after disagreements, and a diplomat who served during the rule of the DPS. The key pillar of the electoral offer of this list was the programme titled "Europe

9 Following the media leaks, Spajić admitted that he had obtained Serbian citizenship in 2009. See: *Pobjeda* (February 2023), Spajić: Srpsko državljanstvo sam dobio 2009. godine, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/spajic-srpsko-drzavljanstvo-sam-dobio-2009-godine> (accessed 10.08.2023).

10 *State Electoral Commission of Montenegro* (April 2023), Final Election Results, <https://dik.co.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/konacni-rezultati-2023.pdf> (accessed 10.08.2023).

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Now 2.0”, which promised an increase of minimum pensions, and a further increase of minimum and average wages. However, the programme did not provide concrete answers how to reach these objectives and neither did Spajić explain the process in his public appearances. Spajić, with previous professional experience in investment banking, also pledged to regulate the crypto market as another source of revenues for the country. However, the Europe Now 2.0 programme drew criticism by his opponents, while, due to his connections to the world of crypto currencies, he found himself in another negative campaign (see section on the coalition “Count Bravely!”). Even Jakov Milatović, the newly elected president of Montenegro and vice president of Europe Now, demonstrated scepticism regarding the Europe Now 2.0 programme.¹¹ This signalled the growing rift between the two leaders, which was previously displayed by Milatović’s public apology over Spajić’s scandal of dual citizenship.¹² After taking over the role as president of the country, Milatović refused to renounce the party posts. Still, he did not take an active role in the campaign for the parliamentary election. Europe Now pledged to continue the foreign policy course, listing EU membership among its top priorities, although it was criticised by opponents for having a different ideological outlook.

Together – For the Future That Belongs to You

Following the defeat in the presidential elections, Milo Đukanović stepped down as president of the DPS, with Danijel Živković taking over as acting president of the party. Živković did not distance himself from his predecessor during the DPS’ 2023 electoral campaign. On the contrary, he praised Đukanović’s legacy, who himself participated in the campaign, although not in full capacity.¹³ Still, the party managed to slightly rejuvenate its offer, while some of its most controversial figures and at the time still active MPs were not included in the electoral list under the name Together. The party ran with its long-time partners, the Social Democrats and the Liberal Party, joined also by the representatives of the Democratic Union of Albanians. The DPS

did not insist on national identity issues to the same extent as it did in previous elections. Confronted with the growing appeal of the promises of better living standards by one of the key opponents, Europe Now, it placed stronger emphasis on socio-economic issues. Their economic promises included launching an investment cycle worth one billion euro, the increase of the average gross salary by 50 per cent, the reduction of the profit tax rate for legal entities and the abolishment of these taxes for IT companies.

For the Future of Montenegro

The Democratic Front (DF) formally ceased to exist when one of its key constituents, Nebojša Medojević’s Movement for Changes, parted ways with the two other constituent parties, New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People’s Party. In a rather peaceful way, the three leaders stated that the DF, established back in 2011, had fulfilled its mission and in mid-May 2023 announced the end of this political alliance.¹⁴ The list, headed by Milan Knežević, leader of the Democratic People’s Party, brought back some of its core messages, after the brief change demonstrated by the contender of the former Democratic Front in the presidential elections – Andrija Mandić.¹⁵ The list was endorsed by Aleksandar Vučić, president of Serbia, with whom both Mandić and Knežević have close and friendly relations. Although the list’s programme included some socio-economic and cross-cutting issues, such as a return to some socialist-era allowances, promises of establishing a Ministry for the Fight Against Organised Crime and Corruption, or naming EU accession as one of its primary objectives, the campaign was also marked by a nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric, for instance, accusing Western embassies of meddling in domestic affairs. Prior to the elections, Knežević stated that, despite the result, he would remain committed to his previous stances of not recognising Kosovo and not favouring sanctions against Russia.¹⁶ This messaging continued to dominate the image of the list in the public, especially since it was followed with concrete moves by Knežević’s party colleagues in his native

11 *Vijesti online* (May 2023), “Evropa sad 2” bez jasnog plana,

<https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/658130/evropa-sad-2-bez-jasnog-plana> (accessed 12.08.2023).

12 *CdM* (February 2023), Milatović nije srećan: Spajić i mi kao partija nismo pokazali odgovornost, dugujemo izvinjenje građanima, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/nazalost-ni-gdin-spajic-ni-mi-kao-partija-nismo-pokazali-potrebnu-dozu-odgovornosti/> (accessed 12.08.2023).

13 *Vijesti online* (April 2023), Živković: Pečat Đukanovića je najvrijednije nasljeđe koje imamo, Crna Gora neće biti Bjelorusija, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/653462/zivkovic-pecat-djukanovica-je-najvrijednije-nasljedje-koje-imamo-crna-gora-neece-biti-bjelorusija> (accessed 10.08.2023).

14 *Vijesti online* (May 2023), Nova i DNP hoće da ostanu zajedno nakon gašenja DF-a: Traže novi model za novo vrijeme, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/656702/nova-i-dnp-hoce-da-ostanu-zajedno-nakon-gasenja-df-a-traze-novi-model-za-novo-vrijeme> (accessed 14.08.2023).

15 Mandić, who was a candidate of Democratic Front in presidential elections, has shifted his rhetoric during candidacy, with one video clip showing him demonstrating regret over some of his previous inflammatory statements.

16 *Pobjeda* (June 2023), Tribina koalicije “Za budućnost Crne Gore” u Zeti – Knežević: Šta god da se desi 11. juna ostaću Srbin koji ide u SPC, ne priznaje Kosovo i nikada neće biti za sankcije Rusiji, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/knezevic-sta-god-da-se-desi-11-juna-ostacu-srbin-koji-ide-u-spc-ne-priznaje-kosovo-i-nikada-neece-biti-za-sankcije-rusiji> (accessed 14.08.2023).

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Municipality of Zeta, which attempted to pass a declaration on withdrawing the recognition of Kosovo's independence.

Count Bravely!

In a rather surprising turn, the two fierce opponents Dritan Abazović and Aleksa Bečić, who had exchanged grave accusations throughout 2021 and 2022, joined forces in the electoral list "Count Bravely!". Their key messages evolved around the need of a decisive fight against organised crime and corruption and comprehensive judiciary reform. They also included socio-economic and housing promises, which, in numerous variations, were a common denominator for all the election contenders. On top of that, they promised moves against illicit enrichment and confiscation of property of criminal origin. The campaign was marked by Abazović's rather strong negative campaign against Miloško Spajić, accusing him of close ties with the alleged South Korean criminal Do Kwon who committed fraud using crypto-currencies. In an alleged letter addressed to Abazović, Vladimir Novović, the chief special prosecutor, and Marko Kovač, the justice minister, Do Kwon argued that Spajić used dubious funding sources for his emerging party. Using his positions within the outgoing government, Abazović claimed that, if proved accurate, the claims of Spajić's involvement represented an issue of highest security relevance.¹⁷ Bečić did not join this negative campaign.

For You

The list For You gathered the once powerful Socialist People's Party (SNP), which broke away from the DPS in 1997 to remain loyal to Slobodan Milošević, and DEMOS, a minor party led by Miodrag Lekić, a former diplomat and former leader of the Democratic Front. Although not expected to collect many votes, the list was relevant as Vladimir Joković, head of the SNP and leader of the list, was deputy prime minister of the outgoing government of Dritan Abazović, while the party also led the ministries for justice, agriculture, education, sports and youth, and health. However, as the elections approached, the news of an internal split within the party emerged, and some of the outgoing ministers were not included in the electoral list. The programme of the list focused on socio-economic and healthcare issues, while its campaign was also marked by topics favouring closer ties to neighbouring Serbia, including

a participation in the Open Balkan Initiative and criticism of the endorsement of Kosovo's Council of Europe membership bid.

Other contenders

Montenegrin electoral law includes a so-called affirmative action for the lists representing the Bosniak, Albanian and Croat communities, which entails a lower threshold for the parties representing them. The key contenders representing these communities in the elections were: the Bosniak Party headed by Ervin Ibrahimović, the Croatian Civic Initiative led by Adrijan Vuksanović, the Albanian Forum, a coalition headed by Nik Đeljošaj, Mayor of the Municipality of Tuzi, and the Albanian Alliance, a coalition whose lead representative was Fatmir Đeka, human rights minister in the outgoing government. Most of these political actors were represented in the outgoing government of Dritan Abazović, although Adrijan Vuksanović resigned the post of minister without portfolio in October 2022 after the no-confidence vote and disagreements with some of Abazović's moves. The Bosniak Party also held important portfolios, including capital investments, labour and social welfare, and the post of deputy prime minister. Although it supported the no confidence vote against Abazović and endorsed Đukanović during the presidential elections, it continued to actively participate in the government throughout its caretaker mandate.

Next to these electoral lists, there were a few additional minor lists, including the Social Democratic Party, which decided not to join the list dominated by the DPS. The movement Turnover (Preokret) also competed in the elections, presenting itself as a "civic", pro-Montenegrin party dedicated to improving socio-economic issues and fostering a new form of political accountability by promising the return of their mandates to citizens if they fail to reach the key milestones of their programme. Movement for Changes, a former constituent of the Democratic Front, was also running separately. The former justice minister in the government of Zdravko Krivokapić, Vladimir Leposavić, who was dismissed due to the statements denying and relativizing Srebrenica genocide, also competed with a list titled Justice for Everyone.¹⁸

17 *CdM* (June 2023), Abazovic: I read Do Kwon's letter this morning and forwarded it to prosecutor's office, it's not true that Spajic informed Adzic about him, <https://www.cdm.me/english/abazovic-i-read-do-kwons-letter-this-morning-and-forwarded-it-to-prosecutors-office-its-not-true-that-spajic-informed-adzic-about-him/> (accessed 14.08.2023).

18 *Portal Analitika* (May 2023), Ovo su liste koje će učestvovati na vanrednim parlamentarnim izborima 11. Juna, <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/ovo-su-liste-koje-ce-ucestvovati-na-vanrednim-parlamentarnim-izborima-11-juna> (accessed 01.09.2023).

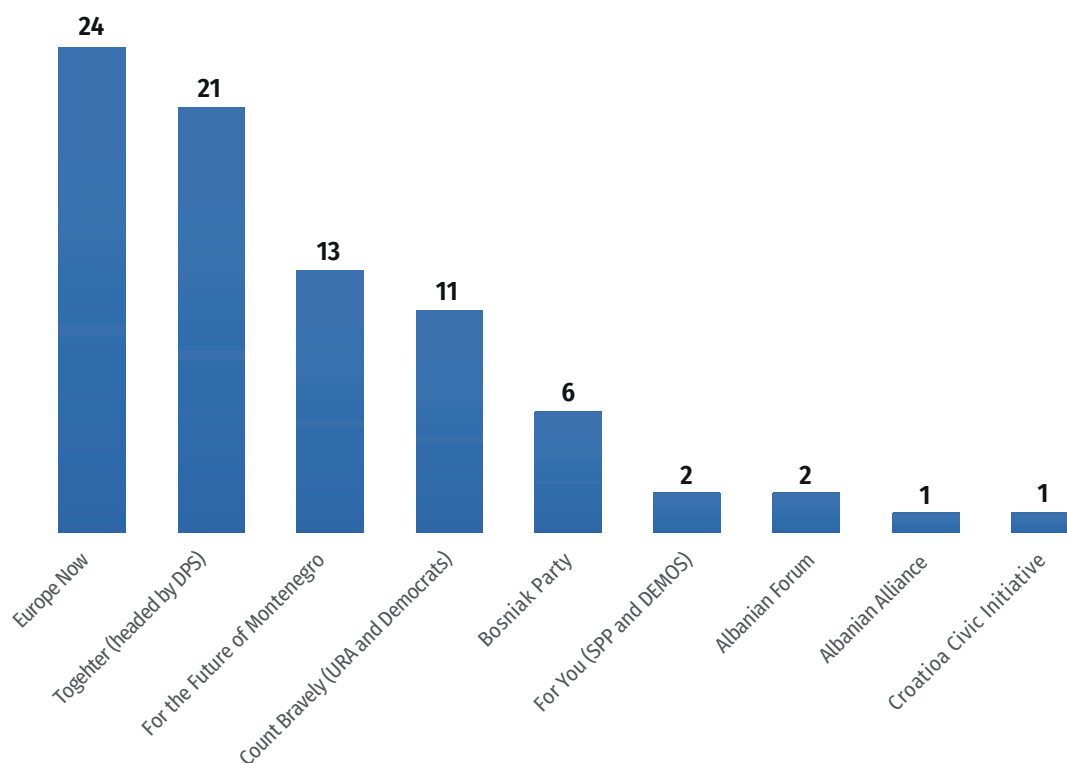
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Election Results: The Puzzle With Many Directions

Elections ended with rather inconclusive results, which allowed many of the electoral lists to declare victory. The list of Europe Now emerged with the highest num-

ber of mandates, 24 out of 81. However, as previously described, the list did not include only representatives of the party Europe Now, which proved to be a complicating factor in the ensuing political negotiations leading to the new government.

Figure 1. Mandates won



Source: RTCG¹⁹

The list headed by the DPS won 21 mandates. Although confirming the trend of diminishing support for the party and its allies, in the overall constellation, the result was seen as a relative success, especially given that the result of the movement Europe Now was below the predictions by public opinion polls.²⁰ The divergent opinions between Spajić and Milatović, coupled with the negative campaigning against Spajić and ambiguous explanations of the key features of the new programme, probably contributed to this outcome.

The list For the Future of Montenegro won 13 parliamentary seats, less than half of the seats they gathered in

2020 (27). However, in 2020 the coalition under the same name included a larger number of political actors. In addition, the relatively high share of mandates increased the relevance of the list in the political negotiations. Spajić in his initial statements did not discard a potential inclusion of some of this lists' representatives in the future government.

The coalition headed by Abazović and Bečić won 11 mandates, out of which 7 were taken by the Democrats and 4 by URA. However, due to the negative campaign led by Abazović against Spajić in the wake of the elections, Spajić rejected the possibility of Abazović's URA

19 RTCG (July 2023), Pogledajte konačne rezultate parlamentarnih izbora, <https://rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/448038/pogledajte-konacne-rezultate-parlamentarnih-izbora.html> (accessed 01.09.2023).

20 The NGO Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM) in May 2023 published a political public opinion report which demonstrated that Europe Now had support which neared 30 per cent of the electorate, almost 4 per cent more than it won in the elections. See: NGO Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM) (May 2023), Political Public Opinion of Montenegro, <https://www.cedem.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Prezentacija-MAJ-2023-FINALE-23h-ENG.pdf> (accessed 02.09.2023).

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participating in the talks about the government formation. Therefore, the Democrats, as another constituent of the joint list, independently participated in the talks with Spajić, very early on demonstrating a high level of agreement with the proclaimed objectives and potential distribution of the key political posts, including the post of the president of parliament, which was initially supposed to be occupied by Bečić.

The Bosniak Party, according to many analysts, had most reason to celebrate, as it doubled its vote share, winning six mandates in comparison to three in the 2020 elections. Therefore, it emerged with a strong negotiating position. Parties representing the Albanian and Croatian communities also had reason to celebrate. The Albanians are now represented by three MPs instead of only two following the 2020 elections, while the Croatian Civic Initiative managed to pass the threshold, which it failed in 2020. The increase of support for these parties has several potential explanations. One of them is that the DPS' defeat in 2020 might have encouraged Bosniak, Albanian, and Croatian voters to support parties representing their communities, which had higher chances to enter government.

The Socialist People's Party together with DEMOS managed to pass the threshold with two MPs. This is a rather positive result, given that in previous elections they were part of broader coalitions leading to the expectations that they would achieve a lower vote share running alone. However, the Socialist People's Party did experience a small drop compared to the 2020 elections, when it received five mandates as part of the coalition For the Future of Montenegro.

The Social Democratic Party, shaken by internal split and resignation of one of its most vocal representatives, Draginja Vuksanović, who was also the party's candidate in the presidential elections, did not manage to enter parliament. The party's critics accused the SDP of slimming the chances of the so-called Montenegrin bloc, headed by the DPS, by running on its own. The Movement for Changes, which participated in several election cycles as part of broader coalitions, and as one of the key and initial constituents of the Democratic Front, also failed to reach the parliamentary threshold.

In a speech after the preliminary results had been declared, Spajić announced that the DPS and URA would not be considered potential partners within the new government, leaving space open for all the other actors.²¹

Principles for the Formation of the Government

Shortly after the elections, in July 2023, the strongest party Europe Now proposed ten key principles for the upcoming negotiations with other potential partners. The list of principles included

- the respect of Montenegro as an independent and sovereign state;
- a stable political government, which will ensure the effective fight against organised crime and corruption; the implementation of the programme Europe Now 2.0, taking into account the stability of public finances;
- a broad parliamentary and societal dialogue aimed at a swift resolution of the existing institutional crisis; electoral reform;
- active and credible NATO membership and a full commitment to accelerated accession to the EU; a composition of the government proportional to the election result achieved by its constituents;
- affirmation of social cohesion and the multiethnic character of Montenegro;
- openness, meritocracy and equal opportunities in appointments;
- continuous social dialogue about the future of Montenegro with relevant actors (citizens, international partners, the academic community, civil society organisations, etc.).²²

The principles were neither further elaborated nor operationalised in what could be the basis for the future exposé of the prime minister-designate. Rather vague in their formulation, they were declaratively accepted by all of Spajić's potential partners. Some of them had additional requests, such as the protection of the Pension and Disability Fund (Bosniak Party), the abolishment of which was speculated as a necessary prerequisite for the implementation of the Europe Now 2.0 programme, and the closure of betting businesses (Albanian Forum coalition).

21 *Monitor online* (May 2023), VANREDNI PARLAMENTARNI IZBORI – DAN POSLIJE: Dozivanje pameti ili predah do nove kampanje, <https://www.monitor.co.me/vanredni-parlamentarni-izbori-dan-poslije-dozivanje-pameti-ili-predah-do-nove-kampanje/> (accessed 02.09.2023).

22 See: *Dan Portal* (July 2023), Evropa sad saopštila deset principa za sastav Vlade, <https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/politika/evropa-sad-saopstila-deset-principa-za-sastav-vlade-5188572> (accessed 02.09.2023).

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Negotiations: Agreed (Not) to Agree Behind the Curtain

Following the legally prescribed deadlines, which stipulate that a prime minister-designate should be selected 30 days after the convocation of the new parliament, President Milatović gave the mandate for forming the new government to his party colleague Spajić in August 2023. Apart from his Europe Now list, Spajić was endorsed as prime minister-designate by the Democrats, the Bosniak Party, two Albanian coalitions, Mehmed Zenka (who was a candidate within the list headed by the DPS), the Croatian Civic Initiative, and the Socialist People's Party. In total, this would ensure a parliamentary majority of 44 out of 81 MPs. However, the Future of Montenegro was more reluctant to give an outright support for Spajić, claiming that he failed to provide a convincing majority.²³

The negotiations for forming the government were criticised for a lack of transparency, since Spajić especially failed to proactively communicate to the media and general public, while his interlocutors from the other parties were commenting on the process.

When the Bosniak Party formally signalled participation in Spajić's future government, it also stated that the coalition For the Future of Montenegro (former Democratic Front) should not be participating in it. This sparked fierce reaction by For the Future of Montenegro, who claimed that the informal negotiations with them were staged the entire time, and that they were never given a formal offer. A smear campaign against Spajić in Serbian media and media in Montenegro affiliated to the constituent of the former Democratic Front was waged. The Bosniak Party, a long-time partner of the DPS, was also depicted as a non-reliable partner and as a sort of "Trojan horse" aimed at facilitating control of the future government by the DPS. A group on Viber, a text messaging service, emerged organising protests and road blockages across the country, while private details such as phone numbers of MPs supporting Spajić were circulated with the aim of exerting additional pressure by contacting them. Investigations by the daily Vijesti discovered that the group was administered by people with criminal records, some of whom

share Serbian nationalist and extremist content on social media and organise pro-Russian rallies.²⁴

Despite the growing public pressures, Spajić maintained his stance that the coalition For the Future of Montenegro will not be part of the new government, as they had "rejected the offer five times". He claimed that his party and MPs from its electoral list were united, although the news soon broke that two MPs from his own party, including the MP representing United Montenegro, did not favour the option of the government in which the decisive role would be acquired by the former coalition partners of the DPS.²⁵ CIVIS, another partner, was conditioning its support on reassurances that the government would ensure the qualified majority for the pending judiciary appointments.

The atmosphere was further complicated by President Milatović openly stating that he would advise to invite constituents of the former Democratic Front and URA into the government. Faced with these aggravating circumstances, the ability of Spajić to form the government was severely brought into question as of early September. With decreasing certainty that the government would be formed with the anticipated support of 44 MPs, who previously agreed to give the mandate to Miloško Spajić, the public was lacking regular proactive information on the dynamics of the process and the potential way out of the extremely complicated negotiation process. Only in mid-October 2023, the hint that a new deal might be struck emerged with the previously described new-found role for the coalition For the Future of Montenegro. This, however, excluded the participation of the Bosniak Party, which was a likely constituent of Spajić's government. Yet, the Albanian coalition decided to enter the government, ensuring its wider legitimacy. In return, most of the parties received significant rewards for their support: The Democrats who renounced the position of the president of the parliament, which was supposed to be taken by its leader, are now represented by four ministers and two deputy prime ministers; the Socialist People Party and the Albanian coalition both have two ministers, one of whom simultaneously performs the role of deputy prime minister. Europe Now holds the posts of prime minister and six ministries, although it confided the Ministry of Energy and Mining and the

23 *Pobjeda* (August 2023), Mandić: Mislim da Spajić nema većinu, svi da dobijemo koliko nam je narod dao na izborima, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/mandic-mislim-da-spajic-nema-vecinu-svi-da-dobijemo-koliko-nam-je-narod-dao-na-izborima> (accessed 02.09.2023).

24 *Vijesti* (August 2023), Ko su kontroverzni administratori „Odrane izborne volje”, https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/671568/ko-su-kontroverzni-administratori-odbrane-izborne-volje?utm_source=vijesti_web&utm_medium=tw-web-social-share&utm_campaign=vijesti_share_counter (accessed 02.09.2023).

25 *CdM* (August 2023), Danilović: Ujedinjena neće biti dio većine od 44 mandata, pozivamo Spajića da pregovore vrati na početak, <https://www.cdm.me/politika/danilovic-ujedinjena-nee-biti-dio-vecine-od-44-mandata-pozivamo-spajica-da-pregovore-vrati-na-pocetak/> (accessed 03.09.2023).

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Ministry of Finance to non-party personalities. Despite the numerous positions which were treated as bargaining chips during the negotiations, only four women joined the government as ministers, none of them occupying the posts of a vice prime minister, which drew criticism from activists and civil society.²⁶

Instead of a Conclusion: Montenegro's EU Prospects After the Formation of the New Government

The lengthiness and unpredictability of the formation process of Spajić's government highlight the fragmentation of the Montenegrin political system and the need for new approaches which cannot bear fruit without compromises. Such an approach would have to be enshrined in the functioning of Spajić's government, which in itself is comprised of actors with different profiles and ideological backgrounds. Political polarisation has been one of the key impeding factors to the reforms in the country and the EU accession process, as best reflected by the inability of parties to agree on top judiciary appointments, including three members of the Judicial Council and the Supreme State Prosecutor.

With the inclusion of the constituents of the former Democratic Front in the parliamentary majority and new power structures, the specific challenge will be posed by the ability of leaders of New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People's Party to adhere to the principles of the agreement and the government's programme. Montenegro's EU and NATO partners have openly criticised these parties, while their leaders have claimed that such criticism represents an undue interference in internal affairs. On the other hand, their statements and actions have failed to convince many analysts and observers that their nominal pro-EU orientation is substantiated with a constructive approach to the key foreign policy challenges, and that Montenegro's full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy would be maintained. Europe Now leaders maintain in their statements that there would be no compromises regarding the country's foreign policy. The period ahead will be a test for both the persistence of Spajić on his key programmatic appeals and for the potential of the former Democratic Front to subdue its nationalist rhetoric.

The inherited practices, such as clientelism, also pose a serious challenge to the government. The Montene-

grin political system and the public sector have proven to be susceptible to influences from various informal groups in the past. Transcripts of intercepted communication between criminal gangs in the country, which were shared with Montenegrin authorities by EUROPOL, have alleged a high level of infiltration of organised crime in the judiciary, the police, and the National Security Agency during the rule of the DPS. Apart from a few cases initiated by the Special State Prosecution Office, the legacy of the captured state has not been rooted out. On the other hand, the cases initiated against the politicians from the former opposition to the DPS, including the current mayor of Budva, Milo Božović, from New Serbian Democracy, have confirmed the hypothesis that organised crime most probably transcends the lines of party divisions in Montenegro. Therefore, the need for a compact and committed fight against organised crime and corruption, which implies the professionalisation of police, adequate practical support and legislative adjustments for more effective prosecution of high-profile cases and independence of the judiciary, must be a top priority if the government wants to live up to its promises of stepping up the fight against corruption and organised crime in an impartial manner. Needless to say, all these issues constitute the core of EU conditionality towards Montenegro and would largely determine the country's capacities to finally reach interim benchmarks within Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), which, along with the pending top judiciary appointments, remain the key stumbling block.

Interestingly enough, the support for Spajić's government was slightly thinner (46 MPs) than the support for Andrija Mandić, leader of New Serbian Democracy, for the position of the president of the parliament (49 MPs). The latter number has a high relevance in political decision making in the country, as it secures a qualified majority (three fifths of the parliamentary seats) which is needed for some of the key pending judiciary appointments, such as the Supreme State Prosecutor Judicial Council's lay members, if the vote in the first round fails to reach a two third majority. This is the reason why Miloško Spajić initially aimed at achieving this qualified parliamentary support, which would make completing these important tasks easier. There were initial hints that Montenegro might reach a way out of the deadlock in decision making on key issues. The new parliamentary majority, with the votes of the now opposition URA, has appointed the missing

26 *Vijesti* (November 2023), Ni brojnije Vlade, ni manje žena, <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/680530/ni-brojnije-vlade-ni-manje-zena> (accessed 14.12.2023).

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seventh judge of the Constitutional Court in November 2023. Also, following several concessions made by Spajić in terms of the start date of the population census and control mechanisms in its implementation, DPS and its partners abandoned the threat of boycotting the process and took active part in it.

DPS, with its vast governing experience, as well as URA, despite its relatively small number of MPs, have the potential of playing the role of a strong opposition and corrective factor of the government. The DPS, however, has so far failed to show the commitment to a more comprehensive reform of the party, which would entail clear distancing from the strong corruption allegations against its former leader Đukanović and his associates. Without a clearer reform agenda, the party will remain more of a beneficiary of the fragmented political scene than of its own initiative. The party's congress has been announced for early 2024, and its outcome will provide a clearer picture of the future path the party will take.