



Probable Change of the Main Ruling Party in Montenegro after Three Decades

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The ruling Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS) on 30 August won the country's parliamentary elections, ahead of the autumn constitutional date, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, after nearly 30 years in power, it is likely to lose it. The opposition won a majority in parliament and is determined to establish a new cabinet based on the demands to continue Montenegro's international obligations and integrate it with the EU.

Why have the opposition parties declared victory?

Despite racking up the biggest percentage, the DPS will not keep the government in its current shape. It had 35.1% of the vote, culminating in 30 seats, a loss of six in the 81-seat parliament (Skupština). DPS's coalition partners won a similar number of seats as in the outgoing parliament, which means that the government has 37 mandates to work with and this coalition could be supplemented only by the former co-ruling group with two seats and an additional MP. However, this will not be enough to appoint a new majority cabinet. Meanwhile, the three largest opposition groups won a combined majority. The alliance "For the Future of Montenegro" with the centre-right pro-Serb Democratic Front (DF) won 32.6% of the vote and 27 seats. The centrist coalition "Peace is our Nation" with the Democrats won 12.5% of the vote and 10 mandates. The "In Black and White" alliance with the Civic Movement of United Reform Action and its socio-liberal, anti-corruption and environmental proposals, won 5.5% of the vote and four seats.

What is the main reason for the change in support for the parties?

The reason is the introduction of the law on freedom of religion passed in December 2019. Its main goal is to nationalise the assets of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC)—the largest religious community in Montenegro—and hand them over to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CPC).

The strengthening of the CPC and granting it autocephaly has since 2018 been a priority of President Milo Đukanović, the informal leader of the DPS, who has held top offices for three decades. These actions were mainly condemned by the DF, which represents the interests of Serbs, who constitute almost 29% of the population. At the same time, according to the August 2020 survey, the SPC was, after the education system, the most popular institution in Montenegro, with a confidence level of 46.4%. The CPC, in turn, was at the bottom of the list at 12.8%. Therefore, the introduction of the new law spurred protests and dissatisfaction with the government. This was reflected in the election results in which the DPS gained the least votes since its inception in 1991, and the alliance with DF won much more than pre-election polls had indicated.

Who will form the new government?

The three opposition groups are most likely to form a government, as they have a combined 41 seats. In the post-election statement, they indicated the need to fulfil Montenegro's international obligations, including in NATO, continue integration with the EU, establish a multi-ethnic government of experts, and strengthen the rule of law. Thus, the determination to break through the cemented political scene may outweigh the certainty as to the durability of the coalition formed by the DF, which refers to Serbian nationalism and questions membership in NATO, and by the progressive movement of Dritan Abazović, a Montenegrin Albanian. Such a cabinet would probably be supported by minority parties and would have to act in cohabitation. Given

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the clear will of the opposition to change the government, it is less likely to extend the current coalition. For this reason, the support of the minority DPS government is also unlikely. However, if the opposition's interests do not allow a cabinet to be established, early elections cannot be ruled out.

What will be the next government's main challenges?

If the government is created by the opposition, it will first want to revise the law on freedom of religion. This is important to the biggest group, DF. However, regardless of the composition of the new government, the consequences

of the COVID-19 pandemic and a number of structural problems in Montenegro remain a challenge. These include the need to democratise a system recognised by Freedom House as a hybrid regime, as well as to fight widespread corruption (every 10th citizen reported they bribed an official in the last year) and strengthen the independence of media (105th in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index). Progress in these areas is also necessary to accelerate Montenegro's accession talks with the EU. They have lasted more than eight years and resulted only in the closure of three out of 35 negotiation chapters.