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The Montenegrin political landscape: The end of political stability?

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The recent start of accession negotiations between the European Commission and Montenegro came against the background of the ever perplexing politics in this Western Balkan country. The minor coalition partner in the ruling government – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) - announced the possibility that it will run in the elections independently from the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), the successor of the Communist Party and the party of former Montenegrin leader Milo Djukanovic. SDP and DPS have been in coalition in the national government continuously since 1998. In contrast, opposition parties are traditionally perceived as weak and incapable of convincing voters that they can provide a genuine alternative to DPS-led governments. However, at the beginning of July, news of two opposition parties trying to unite all anti-government forces, with the help of the country's former foreign minister Miodrag Lekic, once again heated up the debate over the opposition's strength. At about the same time, news concerning the formation of new parties have also dominated the headlines in the local press. Most of the attention is on “Positive Montenegro”, a newly-formed party whose name essentially illustrates its platform: positive change in the society burdened by past mistakes and divisions.

The ambivalent context within which the contours of the current Montenegrin political landscape are being drawn further complicates this puzzle. On one hand, the country's foreign policy and relations with its neighbours are continuously praised by the international community. Even before it officially opened negotiations with Montenegro the EU started “screening” Montenegrin legislation in the field of organized crime, corruption and rule of law in March. On the other hand, the government of the young prime minister, Igor Luksic, seems to be suffering from the deteriorating socio-economic situation in the country.

The repercussions of the privatization of the Podgorica Aluminum Plant are symptomatic of this situation. Mistakes in the privatization of the company, which is one of the country's largest exporters, resurfaced as the 23 million euro guarantees given by the government for the plant's credit to Deutsche Bank in 2010 have been activated in April 2012. Starting in January, a rise in electricity and fuel prices outraged the population, which gathered in several mass civil protests, which are unprecedented in the country's recent history.

Protesters' demands grew over time to include the government's resignation. Luksic, who at the beginning of his mandate embraced information technologies and social networks in order to bring the government closer to his people, made several clumsy moves when commenting on the protesters' demands and behavior, and his popularity is diminishing. Montenegrins express support for one of the main organizers of the protests – Vanja Calovic, head of the NGO MANS, whose popularity is higher than that of most politicians. It is not coincidental that many Montenegrins recognise as the main counter-balance to the overpowering strength of the government not the weak and fragmented opposition, but the energetic civic groups.

The government

Hence, no matter what the epilogue for the current government may be, it will be remembered as one of the weakest in Montenegro's post-communist transition. One might say that the more than 20 year long rule of the DPS has never been closer to an end. Luksic, who took office in 2010 following the resignation of Montenegrin long-time leader Milo Djukanovic, lacks the authority and charisma of his predecessor. As time passes by, he is increasingly perceived as a

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“puppet” of Djukanovic, who maintained influence despite his formal absence from executive power.

The DPS itself appears to be genuinely frightened of the opposition, which grew stronger since the country became independent in 2006. Apart from pro-Serbian parties, the opposition now includes intellectuals, NGOs, and media - all seeking investigations of dubious privatizations, freedom of speech, and an end to nepotism in public administration.

The government's troubles are further intensified by the unclear stances of its minor member, the SDP, which has always tried to maintain an image of something more than a satellite of the DPS and is increasingly becoming critical of certain actions of its senior coalition partner. In addition, recent elections in two coastal towns, which revealed the rise of the party's supporters, can be seen as a reward for the party's clever moves to sporadically distance itself from the DPS and to run in a few local elections independently. Notably, at local elections in Tivat on April 7, the SDP won 15 percent, doubling its support in this small town in Boka bay. Soon after the elections, SDP officials stated that their party, although by many perceived as "small", will become the second biggest party in Montenegro, and that they will consider running at the next parliamentary elections independently.

The “old” opposition

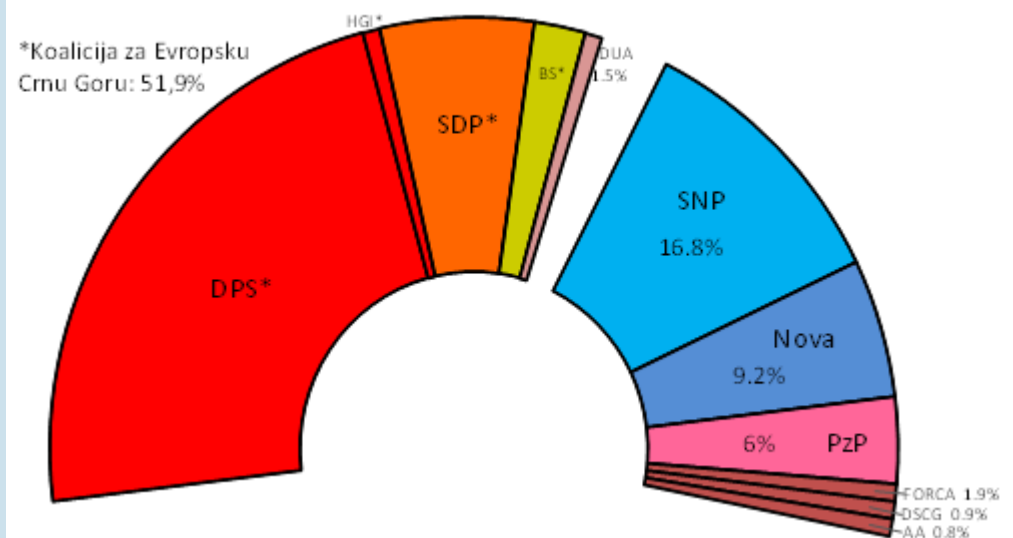
The three biggest opposition parties in Montenegro are the Socialist People's Party (SNP), the New Serbian Democracy (NOVA), and the Movement for Changes (PzP). Although the three parties gathered together in the coalition “For Better Montenegro” at the 2010 local elections their relationship is quite complex. The PzP and NOVA cooperate more closely and criticize the rule of the DPS more harshly. They are the initiators, along with Miodrag Lekic, Montenegro's foreign minister between 1992-1995, of the new so-called “Democratic Front”.

The SNP on its part has not yet explicitly stated whether it will join the front. Overall, the official rhetoric of the SNP is more tolerant towards the DPS than it was before. Although this party, known for its support for Montenegro's state union with Serbia, does not want to lose its traditional voters and still advocates better affirmation of the Serbian national identity in the country, it is trying to raise more “bargaining power” in view of future negotiations for the formation of coalitions and governments. SNP itself emerged from the internal split of the DPS in 1997. Hence, if tendencies for “rapprochement” between the SNP and the DPS really exist and get a more stable shape, through the prism of wider historical perspective it would be a reconciliation of old “party comrades”. The most important consequence of it, however, would be the further weakening of the opposition, which is already perceived as the traditional political loser.

The “new” opposition

The weakness of the opposition, dissatisfaction with the government's performance, and the continuous presence of the old political cadre

The electoral strength of governing and opposition parties



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in party politics, were among the main reasons for the formation of a new party, "Positive Montenegro". In a parliamentary post-communist democracy such as Montenegro, the formation of new parties is definitely not a surprise. However, the rhetoric of Positive Montenegro and the extensive media coverage it received, even before its formal establishment, are symptomatic of the changes in popular mood.

At a time when the socio-economic concerns of the population are growing, Positive Montenegro, as a centre-left civic party, puts emphasis on socio-economic policies and advocates a socially responsible state. Last May, opinion polls conducted by the "Defacto Agency" indicated that although pre-referendum divisions remained frozen, there is a capacity for a new party with a distinctive civic agenda to attract up to 15 percent in the next elections. The image that Positive Montenegro tries to build resembles such a civic-oriented political force. According to its founders, the new party gathers people from all Montenegrin nationalities and former members of other, older parties. Thus, if opinion polls are accurate about the trends in the electorate it seems highly likely that Positive Montenegro will pass the threshold in the next elections and will be represented in the parliament.

Change in sight or more of the same?

However, despite Positive Montenegro's good chances of entering the parliament, radical change in the political scene will depend on a number of factors:

- The DPS-SDP relationship is the most important factor of Montenegrin politics. If this relationship remains cordial, the opposition's chances to make it to the government will likely remain reduced.
- If the SDP runs in the elections independently, it will probably gain considerable support, which will make this party kingmaker of the future government. Still, the opposition is very vocal on the affirmation of Serbian national identity, while the SDP is more eager to defend Montenegrin national symbols than the DPS itself. Hence, for SDP it will be very difficult to form an alliance with pro-Serbian parties of the opposition.
- The capacity of the "old" opposition to unite will also be of crucial importance. The final form of the new, anti-government Democratic Front, will show whether the opposition is capable to efficiently capitalize on protests and popular dissatisfaction over socio-economic issues. For that to happen, the opposition will have to leave aside minor disagreements, national identity issues and the competition over the "distribution of spoils".
- In such a scenario, the opposition might attract the reform-oriented Positive Montenegro into its coalition.

Hence, although the potential for change within Montenegrin society has never been greater the opposition needs more effective action to seriously challenge DPS's lengthy rule. Such action would require that the "old opposition" unites and also tries to bridge Montenegro's persistent ethnic cleavages. In that way, it would likely "gain" the cooperation of Positive Montenegro, thus further complicating DPS's coalition and government-forming deals.

However, even in the scenario of a united opposition, it is still likely that the two traditional coalition partners - DPS and SDP - will stick to one another and in that manner maintain their hold on the government. Then it would be up to the opposition to show that it has the resolve to maintain a united front and resolutely challenge the government's inadequacies over four long years, thus paving the way for a probable victory over the dominant DPS.

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