

Montenegro's 'stabilitocracy': The West's support of Đukanović is damaging the prospects of democratic change

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This autumn's [parliamentary election](#) in Montenegro was marred by an atmosphere of instability and fear stemming from allegations of a coup d'état being under way and by the temporary discontinuation of mobile phone messaging services. [Srđa Pavlović](#) argues that the endorsement of the country's prime minister, Milo Đukanović, by the EU and US is exacerbating distrust in western institutions among Montenegro's civil society.



Montenegro was the smallest republic of the former Yugoslavia (SFRY) and became an independent state only [ten years ago](#). A constant feature of the country's elections has been the leader of the ruling [Democratic Party of Socialists](#) (DPS) and undoubtedly Montenegro's most influential politician, Milo Đukanović. He is to date the longest ruling former communist in Eastern Europe: since the so-called Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution of 1989, Đukanović has served six terms as the Montenegrin prime minister, one term as its president, and a year or two as the country's de facto boss, where he maintained a very strong influence over the government.

In 1997, Đukanović, who started his political ascent as one of the young lions of the Montenegrin League of Communists in the mid-1980s, abandoned his mentor and until then close ally, Serbian war time leader Slobodan Milošević. Calling him "a politician from the past", Đukanović performed a major political and ideological *volte-face*. Having formerly fomented war by stating in the early 1990s that "Yugoslavia has no alternative", he became the most ardent proponent of Montenegrin independence. Despite once vowing to create 'an island of communism in Europe', he then embraced neoliberalism and the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration: the pursuit of EU and NATO membership.

Parting ways with Milošević was a starting point for the Montenegrin prime minister to lay the foundations for two decades of rule that has chiefly benefited a group of party loyalists. Throughout the 2000s, Đukanović led what could best be [described](#) as the selloff of Montenegro's state-owned industry and other enterprises, but according to investigative reporters from Montenegro, over 80% of all companies that were privatised in 1998 went bankrupt by 2014. A quarter of the country's workforce also lost their jobs and the poverty rate increased under Đukanović's economic policies. Moreover, the country's public sector, which accounts for 35% of the workforce, has become a hub of partisanship, where party loyalty is a requirement of employment, and continuous electoral support a condition for keeping one's.

Multiparty democracy was introduced in Montenegro 26 years ago, but there have been repeated accusations of irregularities such as voter intimidation and vote buying. Occasional criticism levelled by Western politicians against Đukanović has not made much of an impact in Montenegro. For his political adversaries, the purpose of such criticism has not been to initiate genuine and systemic reforms in the country. They suggest that instead its aim has been to keep Đukanović in control of the very system that had produced corruption and undermined the rule of law. Stability in Montenegro and Đukanović's loyalty, they claim, have been guiding principles for western governments and the EU, rather than encouraging systemic changes and democratic development. Furthermore, those critical voices find it regrettable and discouraging that foreign diplomats view the outcome of the latest parliamentary elections in October this year, when Đukanović's party won the largest number of seats, as a step forward in building a democratic society in Montenegro.

Đukanović has built what might be termed a 'stabilitocracy' and the West has, to some extent, turned a blind eye to this while simultaneously preaching the virtues of democracy and the rule of law. Western support may also have the

side-effect of deepening existing resentment in Montenegro toward foreign political actors. The usual explanation given for the West's support of Đukanović is that the alternative to his rule is simply worse than he is. As a consequence of this broad brush approach to Montenegro, calls for systemic reforms have been largely delegitimised. Some analysts suggest that the ideological single-mindedness of the West actually works against its own best interests in the region.

Parliamentary elections

According to the leaders of the opposition parties, the latest [parliamentary elections](#) in Montenegro, held on 16 October, were marked by threats of violence, voter manipulation and fraud, the temporary discontinuation of social messaging via *Viber* and *WhatsApp*, and an attempt by the government to criminalise the political alliance [Democratic Front](#) (DF). Numerous media outlets [reported](#) on those events and [expressed concern](#) over the legitimacy of the election results.

[The anti-corruption NGO MANS](#) reported that many of those who promised to vote for Đukanović and his party had their multi-year unpaid power bills and taxes erased just before election day. There are also estimates that the DPS spent approximately €20m on the so-called 'monetary stimulation' for undecided voters. There are furthermore allegations according to which the cost of these operations would have been covered by slash-funds. Estimates have it that such tactics would hand Đukanović an average of 5-7% of safe votes, which translates into 5–6 seats in parliament.

In preparation for the latest elections, the DPS is also accused of activating the entire Montenegrin diplomatic network to work tirelessly on recruiting expats eligible to vote and willing to travel and vote for Đukanović. According to information published [by opposition politicians](#), expats were promised €250-€300 per vote and their travel expenses were paid. An estimated 6,000 to 7,000 Montenegrin residents of Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, Denmark, and the United States showed up at the voting booths that day. The expats' votes gave two parliamentary seats to Đukanović (approx. 2.5 per cent of the total votes). Adding the number of expats that flew in to vote and the approximate cost per person, this would equate to a [payout](#) of anywhere between €3-4m.

On the afternoon of the election day, the government announced that it had prevented a coup d'état and arrested 20 individuals from Serbia. This group was allegedly aiming at creating incidents, attacking the police, breaking into the parliament building, and even attempting to either arrest or kill Milo Đukanović. The media reported that the men sneaked in at the invitation of 'one of the figureheads of the opposition' and that they were led by a retired high ranking police officer from Serbia. Indirectly, the finger of blame was pointed at the DF. Some days later and without offering any meaningful evidence to back his claims, Milo Đukanović went on TV and [directly accused](#) the leaders of the DF of attempting to assassinate him.

The DF and several other opposition party leaders called this a manufactured crisis aimed at influencing the elections that were under way. They argued that releasing such a bombshell on election day had created an atmosphere of fear and a sense of a state of emergency in the entire country. Some opposition politicians fear the arrest of the leadership of the DF and the [eventual banning](#) of this political coalition. As far as the parliamentary elections were concerned, a consequence of this announcement had been that the usually high voter turnout in the evening hours [became a trickle](#).

The DPS [did not manage](#) to get hold of the 41 parliamentary seats needed to guarantee a majority, winning only 38 seats in total, as opposed to the opposition's (combined) 39. The parties representing the Bosniak and Albanian minorities won 3 parliamentary seats and eventually determined the make-up of the new government, renewing their alliance with the DPS. Opposition parties announced that they would not recognise the election results because the entire process occurred in an atmosphere of fear, fraud, and manipulation. They further stated that voting in such a climate could not produce results that constitute "a free expression of the democratic will of the citizens of Montenegro", as enshrined in Montenegro's constitution.

The new government: is Milo truly done with politics?

A few days after the election, Milo Đukanović announced that he would be stepping down as PM, to be replaced by the former Head of the Secret Services and Deputy PM, Duško Marković. Đukanović, however, remains the leader of the ruling DPS. While this move may have come as a surprise for some, for many keen observers it produced a distinct sense of déjà-vu. Milo Đukanović had done the very same thing before – and not once, but twice. In 2006, he installed the late Željko Sturanović as his replacement, only to return as PM two years later. In 2010, Đukanović nominated his long-standing protégé, the Finance Minister [Igor Lukšić](#), as his replacement. Once again, Đukanović came back two years later.

On both occasions, he had given the same reason for leaving politics: pursuing business interests. There is little reason to think that this latest move is anything but a political ploy. There is a high likelihood that the new government led by Duško Marković will be devoted to accomplishing four goals: pursuing NATO integration; completing the EU accession process; making sure the business interests of the former PM, of his family and of his closest advisors are protected; and to closely following Đukanović's advice on how to pacify the political opposition.

What we are witnessing in Montenegro is the slow build-up to a dangerous political, institutional, and parliamentary crisis. The congratulatory messages about “the democratic character of the election process” which came from Brussels (Johannes Hahn and Federica Mogherini) and from the US Embassy to Montenegro do nothing to disperse the view, increasingly rooted among opposition politicians and civil society, that the West is complicit in the highly dubious ruling methods adopted by Đukanović and his party.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic addresses the opening session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Credits: OSCE (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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