

Déjà vu, Montenegrin style: Milo Đukanović wins Montenegro's presidential election



Milo Đukanović was elected President of Montenegro in elections on 15 April. As [Jovana Marović](#) explains, the result was far from a surprise given Đukanović and his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) have [dominated](#) Montenegro's politics since the 1990s. And with the country's opposition divided, it is hard to imagine that a strong and credible alternative to the DPS will appear in the near future.



Milo Đukanović, Credit: [NATO \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

In announcing the victory of their leader, Milo Đukanović, in the first round of the 2018 Montenegrin presidential elections, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), the country's long-standing ruling party, stated that Đukanović had triumphed alone against all. To this we might add that he was able to achieve his victory with a little help from numerous undemocratic mechanisms he has been developing over the last three decades, which have assured his position in power until now.

The proverbial weakness of the opposition, with one part of it advocating closer ties with Russia, also played a role in the result, as did the large number of abstainers, who comprised almost a third of the electorate. The cult of personality surrounding Đukanović, though weaker now than it has been in the past, is still ever present in a country with a little more than 620,000 inhabitants. With this, the combination of factors providing Đukanović with his victory was complete.

Everything that took place during these elections was expected in advance. The eventual return of Đukanović had been on the cards ever since he last withdrew from public office in 2016. It was next to impossible for the opposition to reach consensus and run a campaign around a mutually backed candidate following their failure to build on a year-long opposition boycott of the country's parliament. And Montenegro's shortest election campaign to date, which lasted a little more than three weeks, produced few surprises to say the least. Mladen Bojanić, the candidate representing the largest section of the opposition, was required to balance the conflicting stances of the parties behind him, but at the same time could not rely on these parties to provide his campaign with sufficient organisational support on the day of the election.

However, the elections also illustrated some divisions within the DPS as well. The potential for intraparty conflict between Đukanović and Montenegro's Prime Minister, Duško Marković, has been anticipated for some time. It was also 'assessed' that only Đukanović could ensure a secure win for the party, suggesting he lacks trust in his membership. Đukanović's relentless fight for power could yet put him in a position where he might stand alone against those in his own party.

The 'newly-elected' President is a master of polarisation, transformation and manipulation. At the core of his campaign, as usual, was a narrative that focused on characterising his opponents as actors who lack support for Montenegro and its European and western path. For Đukanović, the opposition have the role of a Trojan horse, with sections of the media being accused of having Russian funding and of attempting to disprove the [coup attempt](#) against Đukanović that was alleged to have taken place in 2016.

In doing so, he has further polarised Montenegrin society, which has been divided ever since the [split in the DPS](#) that occurred in 1997 over political support for Serbia's ruling elite, and especially after the [2006 referendum](#) that led to Montenegro's independence. Moreover, Đukanović has stated that the priority during his time in office will be the strengthening of the country's identity. This will inevitably bring issues back to the fore which are at the heart of the polarisation that now exists in Montenegrin politics.

Since 1991, his role has been an ever-changing one. He has transitioned from being the youngest European Prime Minister, a Communist, a pro-Serbian nationalist, and an ally of Slobodan Milošević, to a champion of Montenegrin independence, and a guarantor of Montenegro's European orientation and regional stability. Given that the DPS lacks a distinct and consistent ideological platform, one might state that the only clear ideology underpinning the politics of Đukanović is simply the retention of power.

His current favourite role, which he has played convincingly, is that of the [guarantor of regional stability](#). However, it should be noted that through six mandates as Prime Minister and one as President, as well as a consistent position as the leader of the ruling party, Đukanović has now had control over the levers of power for almost three decades. He is the actor ultimately responsible for the country's ties with organised crime and for corruption at all levels of the administration, as well as the entanglement of public and private interests which was recently highlighted in the new [EU Western Balkans Strategy](#). These factors are all risks for regional stability.

The picture that has emerged is one in which Đukanović expresses concern that Montenegro may shift from the right path if another party wins, while the EU and US apparently believe in the democratic potential of Đukanović and his ability to keep Russian influence at a decent distance. But the real losers from this game have been ordinary Montenegrin citizens. Indeed, paradoxically given the foundation of his electoral campaign, Đukanović's victory could jeopardise the framework for Montenegro's EU accession by 2025.

One thing that is certain is that regardless of any constitutional limitations, Đukanović will be far more present in the media than outgoing President Filip Vujanović, just as was the case after Đukanović won his first presidential election in 1997. Analysts are already predicting that Đukanović will remain President for ten years, which the Montenegrin constitution allows. The victory will also put wind in the sails of the DPS ahead of local elections later this year. With part of the opposition still outside parliament, and all of the misunderstandings between opposition parties still present and preventing lasting cooperation, it is hard to imagine that a strong and credible alternative to the DPS will appear in the near future.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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