

# Montenegro's new government: marching towards the European Union



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5 months have been necessary to form a new government in Montenegro since the parliamentary elections held on 11 June 2023. This marks a new chapter in the political crisis facing the country, which has been independent since 2006, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 2017 and has been negotiating its accession to the European Union (EU) since 2012<sup>1</sup>.

Even though Montenegro has made rapid progress towards accession in the early 2010s, having opened all the negotiating chapters laid down in the process, the political crisis is now hindering it. After the fall of the Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska Partija Socijalista*, DPS) in the parliamentary elections of 2020, the two successive governments have been overthrown by a vote of no confidence, leaving the country without a government for over 14 months.

While there is no indication that the Montenegrin government formed on 31 October will be the one to put an end to political instability, the unprecedented context in which it was sworn in could well enable the country, on the basis of a solid coalition agreement, to make decisive progress towards the European Union.

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<sup>1</sup> Its application, submitted in 2008, was accepted by the European Union two years later.

## I • An unprecedented context

For the first time since its independence (acquired from Serbia and Montenegro in 2006), and even for the first time since the breakup of Yugoslavia, a government has been formed in Montenegro without the DPS – heir to the Montenegrin branch of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia – being part of it or controlling the country’s presidency. Milo Đukanović, who headed the party from 1998 to 2023, had indeed ruled Montenegro almost continuously since 1991, either as prime minister or president.

After the fall of the DPS in the parliamentary elections of 30 August 2020, he was defeated as well in April 2023 by the 36-year-old candidate of the newly formed “Europe Now! Movement” (*Pokret Evropa sad!*, PES) Jakov Milatović. When the parliamentary elections that followed two months later also saw the PES come in first, Jakov Milatović invited party president Milojko Spajić, 10 months his junior, to form a government.

Milojko Spajić, who initially refused to involve either the DPS or the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian coalition “For the Future of Montenegro” (*Za budućnost Crne Gore*, ZBCG)<sup>2</sup> in the negotiations, finally resigned himself to including the latter, as the country’s strong political polarisation had fragmented the election results and therefore the distribution of seats in Parliament (see chart).

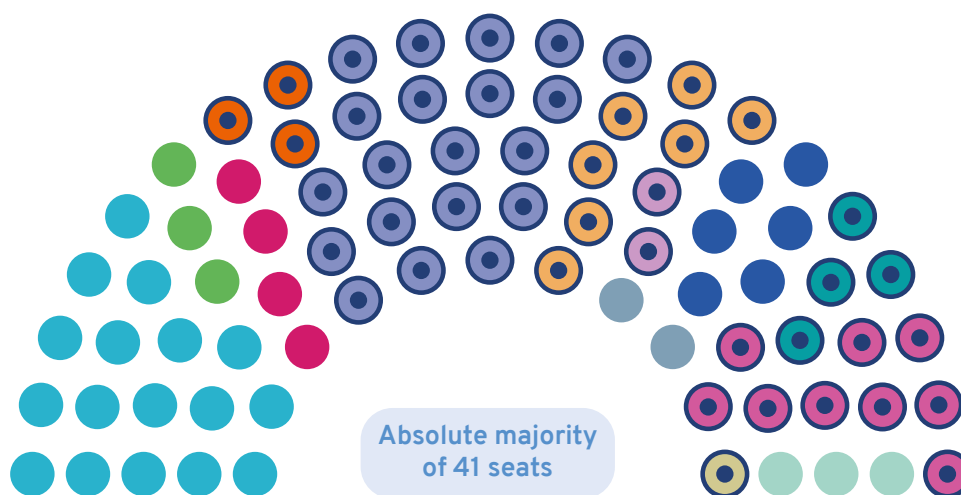
A minority government has finally been formed on 31 October 2023 with the support of a broader pro-government coalition. It is made up mostly of PES members (11 out of 23, including the post of Prime Minister, to which we must add the ministry granted to its coalition partner, the Citizens’ Union *Civis*) as well as 6 members of Democratic Montenegro (pro-European), 2 members of the Socialist People’s Party of Montenegro (part of the ZBCG coalition between 2020 and 2022), and one member of each of the following parties, representing the Albanian minority: the Albanian Alternative (*Alternativa Shqiptare*, ASh – pro-European), the New Democratic Force (*Forca e Re Demokratike*, FORCA – pro-European) and the Democratic Party (*Partia Demokratike*, PD – pro-European).

Although not part of the government, ZBCG is a coalition partner and therefore supports the Spajić government, despite a foreign policy orientation that contrasts with that of its coalition partners. It has obtained, in return, the presidency of Parliament, now occupied by Andrija Mandić, who came third with nearly 20% of the vote in the presidential election which was eventually won by Jakov Milatović – the latter benefiting greatly from a transfer of his votes. Andrija Mandić is most well-known for opposing the independence of Montenegro from Serbia and for his foreign policy priorities he displayed during the election campaign.

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Couteau, *Rival Influences in the Western Balkans: Hard Facts and Limitations*, Policy Brief, Paris, Jacques Delors Institute, 2023.

**CHART.** Composition of the Parliament of Montenegro (XII<sup>th</sup> term)<sup>3</sup>



- ⊙ Pro-government coalition parties
- Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska Partija Socijalista*): 17 seats
- Social Democrats of Montenegro (*Socijaldemokrate Crne Gore*): 3 seats
- Civic Movement United Reformist Action (*Građanski pokret Ujedinjena reformska akcija*): 4 seats
- Socialist People's Party of Montenegro – Citizens' Union Civis (*Socijalistička narodna partija Crne Gore – Savez građana Civis*): 3 seats
- Europe Now! (*Pokret Evropa sad!*): 20 seats
- Democratic Montenegro (*Demokratska Crna Gora*): 7 seats
- Albanian Forum (*Forumi Shqiptar*): 2 seats
- Democratic Union of Albanians/Croatian Civic Initiative (*Union Demokratik i Shqiptarëve/Hrvatska građanska inicijativa*): 2 seats
- Bosniak Party (*Bošnjačka stranka*): 6 seats
- For the Future of Montenegro – Democratic People's Party (*Za budućnost Crne Gore – Demokratska narodna partija*): 4 seats
- For the Future of Montenegro – New Serb Democracy (*Za budućnost Crne Gore – Nova srpska demokratija*): 9 seats
- Special MP Group: 3 seats
- Non-attached MP (New Democratic Force [*Forca e Re Demokratike*]): 1 seat

Anti-Western and calling for close ties with Serbia and Russia, he has asserted his wish to reconsider Montenegro's NATO membership, the recognition of Kosovo's independence and EU sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus since the invasion of Ukraine<sup>4</sup>, a strategic orientation in contradiction with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

<sup>3</sup> Website of the Parliament of Montenegro, [MP Groups](#).

<sup>4</sup> *BBC News на српском*, « *Политика: Црна Гора добила нову владу, Андрија Мандић председник скупштине* », 31 October 2023.

However, before his election as President of the Parliament, he emphasised his desire to “send some new messages” to reconcile Montenegrin society<sup>5</sup>. Despite US concerns<sup>6</sup>, the inclusion of pro-Serbian forces may facilitate the national unity required to address the country’s political polarisation, which has persisted since 2006.

There is every reason to believe that this government will show a certain fragility – no doubt this is the fate of any government that succeeds 30 years of political domination by a single party. Nonetheless, since the coalition agreement provides for an automatic reshuffle at the end of 2024 to include two of the parties of the ZBCG coalition<sup>7</sup>, its signatories have a vested interest in ensuring the success of this coalition for the next 12 months.

This coalition agreement has the potential to sustain for a year the effectiveness of the government that assumed office on 31 October, providing ample time to unblock the country’s EU bid.

## II • A solid coalition agreement

Indeed, the new government’s stated objective, which forms the backbone of the coalition agreement, is to unblock the EU accession process and move as quickly as possible towards membership – ideally by 2028<sup>8</sup>. Montenegro would thus be the first country to join the Union since Croatia (which joined in 2013), sending a strong signal that the train towards the European Union is back on track.

The coalition agreement therefore dispels any doubts as to the strategic orientation of the Spajić government, particularly in a country that has experienced pressures from external powers on its own soil, at least until its NATO accession. Membership, and notably active participation, in the North Atlantic alliance is highlighted as a key foreign policy priority after EU accession<sup>9</sup>. Next come good neighbourly relations, a notable asset for Montenegro’s EU aspirations unlike its fellow candidate neighbours, and the country’s role within international organisations.

Milojko Spajić swiftly dismissed the allegations of a portion of the local population and civil society that his government would be controlled from Belgrade. The very day after his election, he insisted that Serbia did not have a say in the composition of the government and will have no influence over its work<sup>10</sup>.

Considering the signatories to the coalition agreement and the forthcoming reshuffle, which is expected to allocate 4 ministries and a deputy Prime minister position to the ZBCG coalition, it is nevertheless prudent to remain vigilant on this last point. While

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5 Predrag Milić, “Montenegro, an EU hopeful, to vote on a new government backed by anti-Western and pro-Russian groups”, *AP News*, 30 October 2023.

6 Website of the United States Embassy in Montenegro, *Statement by U.S. Ambassador Reinke on Government Formation in Montenegro*, 13 October 2023.

7 *Vijesti*, “Lideri partija potpisali koalicioni sporazum o formiranju vlasti”, 19 October 2023.

8 Patrick Wintour, “Montenegro’s president urges EU to grant country membership”, *The Guardian*, 25 October 2023.

9 *European Western Balkans*, “Montenegro gets new government with Milojko Spajić as prime minister”, 31 October 2023.

10 *BBC News на српском*, « Политика: Црна Гора добила нову владу, Андрија Мандић председник скупштине », *op. cit.*

broad coalition governments inherently demand national unity and compromise, this should not mean yielding to the demands of traditionally pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political forces, whose electoral weight and parliamentary representation are weaker than ever.

### III • Progress within reach

Montenegro has been negotiating its accession to the EU for over 11 years – the longest ongoing negotiations after those with Turkey –, and has already achieved significant progress. It is now the candidate country closest to accession, and a resolute political impetus could break the current stalemate and decisively relaunch the negotiations.

In particular, Montenegro aligns with the CFSP<sup>11</sup> and stands out as the sole candidate country to have opened all the negotiating chapters laid down in the accession process, albeit it has closed only 3 (out of 33). The overall pace of the negotiations now depends on the progress made by the country in the rule of law area.

While there is no assurance that a government of such uncertain stability can lead Montenegro to the EU's doorstep, its potential in breaking the current deadlock and giving new impetus to the country's bid should not be underestimated. The government's first asset is a coalition agreement that brings together a clear majority in Parliament, thereby facilitating the adoption of priority reforms to bring the country into line with EU standards.

Among these priority reforms are those of justice and public administration, alongside the fight against corruption and organised crime – areas long affected by Milo Đukanović and the DPS's firm control on national institutions. By tasking the number three person in the government's with addressing these issues<sup>12</sup> – Deputy Prime Minister Momo Koprivica, immediately following the Deputy Prime Minister charged, among other things, with European and Foreign Affairs –, Miloško Spajić seems to have sized up the urgency of these reforms.

Furthermore, the first decisions taken by the new coalition appear to be heading in the right direction. On 22 November 2023, the Montenegrin Parliament appointed the final missing judge to the Constitutional Court, after a stalemate of more than a year. Key positions in the area of justice still remain to be filled, while the Law on the Judicial Council and Judges and the Law on State Prosecution Service still need to be brought into line with EU standards.

Combined with the essential economic and financial reforms, these actions will have significant consequences for the country. With determination and unprecedented national unity, substantial progress can already be made by the new government to guide Montenegro towards EU membership during the next term of the European Commission. •

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<sup>11</sup> [Montenegro 2023 Report](#), Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying the document *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*, SWD(2023) 694 final, Brussels, 8 November 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Website of the Government of Montenegro, [Government departments, agencies and public bodies](#).

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