

MONTENEGRO'S NEW GOVERNMENT

Key takeaways from the formation of the Abazović Government as Montenegro heads for new elections in 2023

5 May 2022

Issues & Sectors	Change of Government, Montenegrin Snap Parliamentary Elections 2023
Stakeholders	Parliament of Montenegro, Government of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović

Following three months of political uncertainty, Montenegro's multi-party parliament voted to approve the country's new coalition government on 28 April. The new government is led by Dritan Abazović as Prime Minister and supported by a combination of moderate parties, with confidence and supply support from the formerly longtime ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS).

The Abazović Government takes office with just a one-year mandate, as Montenegro is expected to hold snap parliamentary elections in 2023, in parallel with the upcoming Presidential elections. The new, investment-friendly cabinet was confirmed on the promise of speeding up Montenegro's EU accession bid at a time when Russia's war on Ukraine is profoundly impacting the country's economy.

Below, Aretera takes a deeper look at the political situation in Montenegro, the priorities of the new government, as well as the political and economic challenges facing the country.

This memo will cover:

Montenegro's first minority government.....	2
The composition of the Montenegrin parliament.....	3
Implications of the new government	3
Looking ahead.....	4

MONTENEGRO'S FIRST MINORITY GOVERNMENT

On 28 April, the Parliament of Montenegro, the unicameral legislature of the Southeast European state, voted to approve the country's new government, led by Dritan Abazović as Prime Minister.

The formation of the Abazović Government comes three months after Montenegro's experimental coalition of pro-European and pro-Serbian parties, which had been running the country since December 2020, collapsed following a vote of no confidence.

A NATO member since 2017 and an EU candidate country since 2010, the Western Balkans state, which became independent from neighbouring Serbia in 2006, is deeply divided between parties supporting the country's Euro-Atlantic path and political forces with pro-Serbian (and pro-Russian) views.

Held in August 2020, Montenegro's last elections put an end to the three decade-long rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović. The incumbent President and longtime DPS leader was instrumental in leading the country into independence in 2006 and into the transatlantic security alliance in 2017. However, he has been repeatedly criticized for widespread corruption and authoritarian tendencies that have characterized his rule.

This led to an unlikely alliance of pro-Serbian and pro-EU parties ousting the DPS in the 2020 election and eventually forming a government led by Zdravko Krivokapić in December 2020. As Prime Minister, Krivokapić was supported by the (now dissolved) For the Future of Montenegro, a pro-EU multi-party alliance, the fellow pro-European Civic Platform of newly elected PM Abazović, and the Democratic Front, the largest pro-Serbian formation in the Montenegrin parliament.

Combined, the three formations had a razor-thin majority of 41 MPs in the 81-seat parliament, while the coalition itself was shaky from the very beginning. Multiple coalition disputes and power struggles eventually led to a no confidence motion, submitted by the Civic Platform and approved by the parliamentary majority in February this year.

Among other issues, Abazović's party was the main critic of the previous government over its alleged mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, its failure to attract foreign investment into the country and a lack of progress towards EU accession.

Following months of negotiations, the Civic Platform finally reached an agreement with three other parliamentary groups – the pro-EU Socialist People's Party (SNP), as well as the ethnic Albanian and Bosnian formations – to propose a minority government led by the Civic Platform leader and with confidence and supply support from longtime political rival DPS, outside the government.

Confirmed on 28 April, the new government was supported by 45 of the 81 MPs in parliament, including MPs from the Civic Movement, the Socialist People's Party, the ethnic Albanian and Bosnian formations, as well as the DPS. Đukanović's party, however, does not have representatives in the new cabinet. The parties going into opposition, including the pro-Serbian Democratic Front, have said the new government is "a betrayal" of the results of the historic 2020 parliamentary elections that ousted DPS from power.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE MONTENEGRIN PARLIAMENT

Party/Alliance	Number of MPS	Affiliation
Socialist People's Party of Montenegro (SNP) – centre-left, pro-European)	5	government
Civic Platform "In Black and White" (CnB) – pro-European alliance between the green-centrist the United Reform Action (URA) and the liberal Citizens' Union (Civis)	4	government
Bosniak Party (BS) – conservative, pro-European, minority party	3	government
Albanian Coalition (AK) – multi-party coalition between ethnic Albanian movements, pro-European	3	government
Independent	1	government
Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) – populist, pro-EU, Montenegrin nationalist	30	support
Democratic Front (DF) – right-wing populist multi-party alliance of pro-Serbian parties	15	opposition
Peace Is Our Nation (MNN) – big-tent, multi-party alliance of pro-European parties	10	opposition
Movement for Changes (PzP) – right-wing populist, anti-corruption	5	opposition
Social Democrats (SD – centre-left)	3	opposition
Independents	2	opposition
Total	81	

IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT

The Abazović Cabinet constitutes the first minority government in the history of Montenegro, posing serious concerns for its political stability. As Russia's war on Ukraine has the potential to impact the Western Balkans economically and by proxy, below we outline the main challenges and expectations ahead of the country:

- **Montenegro will hold snap parliamentary elections in 2023.** The new government took office with just a one-year mandate as Abazović has promised to hold early parliamentary elections. The snap parliamentary vote is likely to be held in parallel with the country's next Presidential elections, scheduled for the spring of 2023. The current governing coalition is a combination of moderate parties across the aisle, with the new PM likely aiming for increasing public support by campaigning on stability.
- **Political stability remains a key concern.** Although it was confirmed by the majority of the parliament, the Abazović Cabinet is supported by less than a quarter of MPs in the multi-party legislature, with the new minority coalition relying heavily on external support from the

former ruling DPS. Consequently, the new coalition could face instability along a number of issues, although the proximity of the upcoming snap elections could ensure the government remains in office until next spring.

- **Abazović enters office with only brief governmental experience.** Before serving as Deputy Prime Minister in the previous government, Abazović, a 36-year-old ethnic Albanian and a political scientist by profession, had served as an MP in the Montenegrin legislature since 2012. His government has outlined the following priorities: the fight against corruption, more sustainable investment and development, the protection of the environment, as well as better care for children and the youth.
- **Relations with the EU will take priority.** The Abazović Government was confirmed on the promise of speeding up Montenegro's EU membership bid. The Southeast European state officially became an EU candidate country in 2010 and accession talks have been ongoing since 2012. Accordingly, and in light of Russia's war on Ukraine, his Government will focus on issues associated with the country's EU aspirations, including judicial reforms and the improvement of the rule of law. However, the latter could face obstacles as some of those reforms would need a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Abazović will continue the previous government's policy of respecting Western sanctions against Russia.
- **The new government faces vast economic uncertainty.** The impact of Russia's war on Ukraine is being felt across the Western Balkans, for geopolitical but also economic reasons. With a population of only 620,000, Montenegro's economy is heavily dependent on the country's tourism sector and Russian tourists in particular. Russia is also a major investor in Montenegro ([the second largest after China](#)), accounting for up to 26% of the country's GDP in 2019. Given Russian sanctions, inflationary pressure and rising energy prices, the need for the new government to aggressively court investment from elsewhere is acute.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Abazović Government enters office with a one-year mandate, with snap parliamentary elections expected in 2023, in parallel with the upcoming Presidential elections. The new government brings an end to the country's political stalemate and should last until the early elections are held, however a number of political issues – ranging from judicial reforms to geopolitics – could pose stability concerns. Economic recovery, foreign investment and relations with the European Union will be the main priorities for the new government.

###

*If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:
Dominik Istrate, Advisor for Central and Eastern Europe at d.istrate@aretarapa.com*



Aretera

Aretera is a leading independent public affairs advisory firm operating across Central & Eastern Europe, Turkey, Ukraine, Central Asia and a growing number of global emerging markets. We advise a wide range of leading multi-national corporations, providing counsel on all aspects of public policy, public affairs and reputation management.

www.aretarapa.com