

POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN MONTENEGRO

Key takeaways from the fall of the Abazović Government & possible forward scenarios

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Issues & Sectors	Political Stability in Montenegro
Stakeholders	Parliament of Montenegro, Government of Montenegro

Only four months into its tenure, Montenegro's coalition government, led by Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, has collapsed after losing a no confidence vote on 19th August. The fall of the government comes after the ousted PM signed a disputed agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, triggering opposition from the formerly longtime ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which filed a no confidence motion in parliament.

Lawmakers in the Montenegrin parliament will now aim to form a governing majority behind a new cabinet, however failure to do so will trigger snap parliamentary elections. This comes as Montenegro, which broke away from neighbouring Serbia in 2006, remains deeply divided over political and ideological differences and continues to be politically and economically impacted by the economic downturn brought by Russia's war on Ukraine.

Below, Aretera provides further insight into the fall of the Abazović Government, its consequences for Montenegrin politics and possible forward scenarios.

This memo will cover:



-  the disagreements leading to the fall of the Abazović Government,
-  the long-running divisions shaping Montenegrin politics,
-  an introduction into the country's diverse political landscape,
-  the possible scenarios for the fall of the government,
-  the country's political and economic challenges.

THE SHORTEST-LIVED MONTENEGRIN GOVERNMENT

On 19th August, Montenegro's multi-party minority government – led by green-centrist Prime Minister Dritan Abazović – collapsed following a no confidence vote in the country's unicameral parliament. Supported by opposition MPs and the formerly longtime ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović, the coalition partners of the Abazović-led green-centrist United Reform Action (URA) party toppled the government by 50:31 in the parliamentary vote.

The collapse of the government marks the second successful vote of no confidence in the Montenegrin parliament this year, just four months after the first. The last parliamentary elections in 2020 produced an unlikely coalition government – led by ex-PM Zdravko Krivokapić – between pro-European and pro-Serbian parties uniting to oust the formerly longtime ruling DPS from power over concerns of systemic corruption and authoritarian rule. The Krivokapić Cabinet was supported by a wide range of parties, including the Abazović-led URA, which eventually triggered the motion of no confidence over internal disputes, leading to the fall of Krivokapić and his Government in early 2022 and the formation of the Abazović Government in April¹. The latter administration has now become the shortest-lived government in the history of Montenegrin democracy.

LONG-RUNNING DIVISIONS BEHIND THE GOVERNMENT COLLAPSE

The multi-party coalition behind the now toppled Abazović Government functioned as a minority cabinet, relying on external support from the Đukanović-led DPS, which holds the largest parliamentary group in the Montenegrin legislature. The DPS withdrew its support for the government after PM Abazović signed an agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), the largest religious community and landowner in the country.

The agreement with the SPC was aimed at resolving long-standing disputes between the church and the Montenegrin state that emerged over a law adopted three years ago during a previous, DPS-led government. While those against the 2019 church law claim it would take property away from the SPC, Abazović's critics have said his deal with the Serbian Orthodox Church would give the SPC too much power in comparison with other religious communities.

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, with the former group fearing the SPC deal would increase Serbian influence.

With Montenegro divided over the role of the SPC and the country's ties to Serbia, critics also accuse the Serbian Orthodox Church of harming the interests of a neighbouring state. Montenegro's own Orthodox Church was set up in 1993 but has not yet been recognized by Orthodox communities. Furthermore, the leadership of the SPC still does not fully recognize Montenegro's independence.

Defying his critics, Abazović – an ethnic Albanian - defended his deal with the Serbian Orthodox Church, claiming it would help solve long-running divisions between the pro-EU and pro-Serbian/Russian camps. He also accused Montenegrin organized crime groups of being involved in the effort to bring down his government over his anti-corruption efforts.

¹ See [here](#) for our overview of the Abazović Government from April 2022

THE COMPOSITION OF THE MONTENEGRIN PARLIAMENT

Party/Alliance	Number of MPs
Socialist People's Party of Montenegro (SNP) – centre-left, pro-European)	5
Civic Platform "In Black and White" (CnB) – pro-European alliance between the green-centrist United Reform Action (URA) and the liberal Citizens' Union (Civis)	4
Bosniak Party (BS) – conservative, pro-European, minority party	3
Albanian Coalition (AK) – multi-party coalition between ethnic Albanian movements, pro-European	2
Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (SDP-LP) – Montenegrin nationalist, centre-left	3
Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) – populist, pro-EU, Montenegrin nationalist	29
Democratic Front (DF) – right-wing populist multi-party alliance of pro-Serbian parties	15
Peace Is Our Nation (MNN) – big-tent, multi-party alliance of pro-European parties, with pro-Serbian elements	10
Movement for Changes (PzP) – right-wing populist, anti-corruption, pro-Serbian	5
Social Democrats (SD – centre-left)	3
Independents	2
Total	81

POSSIBLE FORWARD SCENARIOS

The current crisis is likely to set the stage for a major political confrontation between supporters of the Đukanović-led DPS and the Abazović-led centrist bloc. Below we outline the possible scenarios as the uncertainty continues:

A new government is formed with a multi-party majority. The Abazović Government will now continue in an acting capacity until a new government is formed. Under the Montenegrin constitution, President Đukanović must nominate a PM-designate to form the country's next cabinet. The DPS will likely aim for a parliamentary majority behind a close-to-Đukanović nominee. Holding 29 MP seats in the 81-seat legislature, the DPS is the largest formation in the Montenegrin parliament, allowing the party to lead coalition negotiations. However, as proven in the 2020 elections, the DPS will struggle to find coalition partners, as the key campaign message of almost all opposing parties is to confront the deep-rooted corruption that accompanied its 30-year rule.

Montenegro is run by an interim government until new elections are held. Montenegro's parliament, which includes ten parliamentary groups, is deeply divided along political and ideological lines, as well as over reactions to the Abazović-brokered church deal, the ousted ruling bloc and the formerly ruling DPS. Should Đukanović's party fail to garner sufficient support, the fall of the Abazović Cabinet will eventually trigger snap parliamentary elections. Back in April, Abazović formed his Government with a one-year mandate and snap elections scheduled for early 2023.

A presidential call for snap elections would then be followed by the formation of a caretaker government, also with a limited mandate. If called, the snap parliamentary vote could take place in early 2023.

LOOKING AHEAD

With a second government falling in just nine months, political instability is increasingly becoming a major concern in Montenegro as long-running political and ideological tensions deepen the current crisis in a country that has, for long, had a diverse party setting. Lawmakers in the Montenegrin parliament will now aim to form a governing majority behind a new cabinet, however failure to do so will trigger snap parliamentary elections.

The current political crisis comes as the European economic downturn brought by Russia's war against Ukraine is profoundly impacting the Montenegrin economy, while the country's EU aspirations also hang in the balance. The World Bank [expects](#) the country's GDP growth for 2022 to slow to 3.6% from a previously projected 5.9%, while inflation was 14.9% in July, year-on-year.

Also crucial to the country's economy is its tourism sector, which was expected to suffer a significant downturn over the loss of Russian and Ukrainian tourists. However, the Montenegrin tourism industry seems to have [proven these fears wrong](#), with the number of foreign tourist visits – predominantly from Serbia, Russia and Ukraine tourists – more than doubling in June. Accordingly, the new government will have to navigate through a series of economic challenges, in addition to the potentially continuing political uncertainty.

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