

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM MONTENEGRO'S PRESIDENTIAL RUNOFF

Đukanović's Fall & Landslide Victory for Milatović Signifies New Dawn in Montenegro

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INTRODUCTION

Montenegro's long-time leader, President Milo Đukanović, has been unseated from power following a second-round runoff loss against his rival, former economy minister Jakov Milatović. The 37-year old Milatović, whose background includes being the EBRD's principle economist for Southeast Europe, achieved a landslide 60% of the vote, becoming one of the world's youngest Heads of State.

Just months ago, Milatović co-founded a pro-Western civic platform, Europe Now, with fellow ex-banker and former finance minister, Milojko Spajić. The movement placed economic reform at the core of its programme, promising to raise minimum salaries and pensions and to accelerate the country's EU accession bid. Crucially, while it remains committed to the country's NATO membership and foreign policy objectives, Europe Now has also found widespread support from Montenegro's sizeable Serbian minority, soothing recent tensions between nationalist camps on both sides of the ethnic divide.

Having already secured the capital, Podgorica, in local elections held in October 2022, Europe Now has now become a major political force in Montenegro. Buoyed by Milatović's stunning presidential success, the party will now look ahead to snap parliamentary elections in June 2023 full of confidence. Other political groups – not least the Montenegrin nationalist Democratic Party of Socialist (DPS), which has effectively run the country for the past three decades – will face a major test of their political relevance going forward.

This memo will cover:

-  an introduction to Montenegro's presidential elections,
-  the tense campaign build-up to the runoff vote,
-  an overview of the second-round results,
-  the implications of the upcoming snap parliamentary elections.

ELECTION OVERVIEW

On Sunday 19th March, the first round of the presidential elections was held, in what was Đukanović's last-gasp attempt to remain in power. Over the past 32 years, Đukanović's rule has eradicated the country's democratic values and institutions, with ongoing rumours and allegations of his involvement in serious corruption scandals. As such, Đukanović's own and his party's popularity was continuously shrinking, compounded by a parliamentary election defeat in 2020 and a poor DPS performance in the 2022 local elections¹. Though the incumbent achieved the highest share of the first-round vote (35.1%), it was far from the majority needed to avoid a second-round runoff.

As noted in our previous memo on the presidential election², the runoff was billed as a referendum on Đukanović's rule, and almost all other candidates and political parties had vowed to back the candidate that would face him in the second round. With 28.9% of the popular vote, that second-placed candidate was Jakov Milatović, who had enough coalition potential to defeat Đukanović in a head-to-head.

With two weeks to turn around a significant deficit, Đukanović turned up the heat on key nationalist and identity matters. First, widespread calls were made for Montenegro's diaspora to return for election day "to save Montenegro's statehood". Second, the campaign went into overdrive on claims that a vote for Milatović would be a victory for Serbian - and therefore Russian - expansionism in the region. Calls were made by some (albeit marginal) opposition figures in Serbia, that its President, Aleksandar Vucic, was actively meddling in toppling Đukanović.

These claims were, of course, baseless. There was no indication of collusion between Belgrade and Milatović (on the contrary, Serbia's authorities willingly released Milojko Spajić's residency permit in Belgrade, disqualifying the Europe Now co-founder from running and paving the way for Milatović to contest the presidency in his place). Moreover, going into the second round, Milatović had garnered support from right across the political spectrum, not least pro-Western progressives and the civic platforms, including the sitting Prime Minister, Dritan Abazović. Informally, Milatović had gained the international backing of the US and the UK, while the European Greens publicly supported his bid to unseat Europe's longest-serving ruler.

Đukanović's attempts to wedge divisions between progressive Montenegrins and the Serbian minority were seemingly given a lifeline in the shape of a European football qualifier match between Montenegro and Serbia, played in Podgorica just five days before the crucial vote. Any disturbances or nationalist outbursts would have been overemphasised by media on both sides of the border and played right into Đukanović's polarising identity politics. There were none, however; in fact, the Serbian national anthem was widely applauded by Montenegrin home supporters, which would have sent a deafening signal to Đukanović – seated in the VIP section of the stadium – that his escalation game was truly over.

The turnout for Sunday's vote was a high 69.3% and, as expected, Milatović had effectively rallied almost all other most political parties, movements, and civic groups behind his cause. In the end, Milatović received 60.1% of the vote, compared to Đukanović's 39.9%. The biggest difference was in the capital, Podgorica, where Milatović's margin was almost double: 70,438 votes compared to the incumbent's 37,122.

¹ See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the aftermath of the local elections from December 2022

² See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the first round of the presidential elections from March 2023

SNAP PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

No sooner did the dust settle on Sunday night's celebrations, than discussions were already under way about upcoming snap parliamentary elections. Just days before the presidential first round vote, Đukanović announced parliamentary elections would be held on 11th June. Given his and DPS' fall, as well as Europe Now's meteoric rise, Montenegro's entire political scene will be forced to recalibrate their positioning.

For Europe Now, which has gained the support of both Montenegrin progressives and the country's large Serbian minority, it will have to carefully navigate its newfound power according to these often ideologically opposed constituencies. If and when it makes concessions to the Serbs, it will invite criticism from well-versed nationalist segments and regional sceptics who are adamant that Europe Now is a Belgrade (if not Kremlin) ploy, thereby reviving DPS' support and alienating other progressive groups, notably Prime Minister Abazović's URA. If it overly exaggerates its Montenegro-first, pro-NATO character, however, Europe Now risks pushing the large Serbian minority into the arms of more hardline nationalist parties, namely the Democratic Front (DF).

In the hours following the vote, Milatović said that his first official visit as President would be to Brussels, which offers some, albeit symbolic, indication of the party's priorities. Other parties will likewise be forced to anticipate Europe Now's positioning, consider their own potential as junior coalition partners and the extent to which they can move towards the centre to pick at Europe Now's voter base. For DPS, whose support is expected to exponentially drop having effectively lost control of all state institutions, the key question is whether to stick with its founder, or pivot towards a fresher, more progressive option.

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If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:
[Philip Merrell](mailto:p.merrell@areterapa.com), Regional Director for the Western Balkans at p.merrell@areterapa.com



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