

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM MONTENEGRO'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Second round runoff signals strong potential for historic change

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INTRODUCTION





Presidential elections held on Montenegro on Sunday 19th March threaten to unseat the small Balkan nation's long-time leader, Milo Djukanović. Though Djukanović indisputably received the highest share of votes, the contest will go to a second-round runoff, which is being built-up as a referendum on his three decades-long rule.

The election result provided few surprises; all pre-election polling suggested the incumbent President would receive the most votes, but not pass the 50% mark required to secure another 5-year term as Head of State. The main unknown heading into the election was over who would join Djukanović in the second round, with 37-year-old former economy minister Jakov Milatović now emerging as a credible challenger.

The second round will be held on 2 April and judging by pre-election commitments made by almost all presidential contenders (with the exception of Montenegrin nationalist candidate Draginja Vuksanović-Stanković), Milatović will receive widespread support from across the political spectrum in what is likely to be an historic runoff which could mark the departure of Europe's longest-serving ruler.



This memo will cover:

-  an introduction to Montenegro's presidential elections,
-  the tense campaign build-up to election day,
-  an overview of the first-round results,
-  steps ahead to the run-off and the prospects for long-time leader Djukanović.

A TENSE BUILD-UP

Djukanović's decades-long grip on Montenegro's political landscape began to unravel in August 2020, when his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) lost parliamentary elections for the first time since the young nation split from Serbia in 2006. The new government was formed by a coalition of pro-Western, civic and pro-Serb parties.

The government's mandate would prove short-lived, enduring continuous attacks from DPS and other Montenegrin right-wing factions on one side, and pro-Russian elements represented by the Democratic Front (DF) on the other. It was ousted in a vote of no confidence in February 2022, and replaced by a minority government, led by remnants of the 2020 government, including current Prime Minister Dritan Abazović who continues to lead the government as acting head of government¹.

Throughout this period, DPS' support has continuously dwindled, and in October 2022 faced a major setback following local elections², in which it lost control over the capital, Podgorica. The main winners of those local elections were a civic, pro-Western movement, *Europe now*, led by two young ministers in the 2020 government, Miloško Spajić and current presidential contender Jakov Milatović.

Just two months after forming, the party had successfully appealed to both progressive Montenegrin voters and large segments of the country's sizeable Serbian minority, swept to power in the capital and was eyeing to take on Djukanović for the Presidency.

Tensions began to rise in the lead up to the presidential election as the true extent of Montenegro's polarization became clear. While attending a convention in the DPS stronghold of Cetinje on March 10th, Milatović was physically attacked by nationalist hardliners. Furthermore, and contributing to the referendum-like climate that was building up, out of the six presidential candidates, all but one had promised to back the challenger to Djukanović in the second round.

Complicating Milatović's calculation was the pro-Russian DF, whose leader, Andrija Mandić, also enjoys substantial support from Serbian minority voters. While he had attempted to soften his hardliner tone in this campaign, in order to appeal to broader voter bases, Mandić was a long-time antagonist of Montenegrin statehood and identity and, just like Djukanović, offered limited coalition potential if he could reach the second round.

It became clear that Djukanović preferred Mandić as the runoff rival, as DPS-sponsored polls massively exaggerated Mandić's support, and the two leaders met for a one-to-one debate three days before the election in what appeared to be an attempt to show Mandić as the main challenger, even though objective polls had him trailing behind Milatović by this point.

As such, the main unknown going into Sunday's vote was which of these two candidates would secure the crucial second spot, as this would have massive implications on the prospects of ultimately unseating Djukanović.

¹ See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the collapse of the Abazović Government from August 2022

² See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the political impasse in Montenegro following the country's local elections from December 2022

ELECTION RESULTS

Presidential Elections Results Breakdown	
Presidential Candidate	Popular Vote (%)
Milo Djukanović – Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)	35.3
Jakov Milatović – Europe now	28.9
Andrija Mandić – Democratic Front	19.3
Aleksa Becić – Democrats	11.1
Draginja Vuksanović-Stanković – Social Democratic Party (SDP)	3.15
Goran Danilović – United Montenegro	1.38
Jovan Radulović – Independent	0.76

(Source: State Election Commission of Montenegro)

DJUKANOVIĆ'S FINAL ACT?

As noted in Aretera's 2023 Annual Political Risk Forecast on Southeast Europe, Montenegro's heightened nationalism was one of the top three regional risks going into this election year. It is around such events that questions of identity and nationhood become most salient, and around which Djukanović – who had guided the nation to independence and became the architect of its nationalist cause – is best able to emphasize his relevance.

Capitalizing on this potential, just two days before the presidential vote, Djukanović ramped up the pressure further by issuing a decree to dissolve the current parliament, with snap parliamentary elections announced for 11th June. Given the trajectory of the DPS' and Djukanović's ever-shrinking popularity, this was likely a last-gasp attempt to maintain power.

Over the years, Djukanović and other senior DPS officials have faced allegations of serious corruption scandals and links to organized crime structures (in 2009, Italian prosecutors charged Djukanović for being part of a cigarette smuggling ring, though he used his immunity as then-Prime Minister to evade the courts). As such, many opposition figures have called on incoming governments to begin processing Djukanović's case once DPS' hold over state institutions is lost.

However, before the snap parliamentary elections, Djukanović faces a formidable challenge in the 2nd April runoff. Milatović's first round result exceeded even his supporters' more optimistic predictions, with a near 10-point leap ahead of third-placed Mandić. With the exception of Draginja Vuksanović-Stanković, who received just over 3% of the vote, all other candidates have pledged to support the candidate facing Djukanović in the second round.

As such, calculations appear to show that Montenegrins will wake up on April 3rd without Djukanović in office for the first time since 1991. Moreover, they signal the dawn of a new political force in *Europe now*, which has seemingly bridged bitter social divisions, already gained the capital, is poised to take the presidency and is gaining considerable support and momentum towards June's parliamentary elections.

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