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Montenegro: A new government

On December 4, 2020, the new government of Montenegro was elected, headed by Zdravko Krivokapić. For the first time in almost three decades, the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (*Demokratska partija socijalista Crne Gore, DPS*) – the political party the current President of Montenegro Milo Đukanović comes from – has not formed the government. The new prime minister announced that it would be a government focused on introducing profound changes in the country. European integration, cooperation within NATO, and the recovery of the economy after the crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic remain a priority. However, a minimal government majority in the Montenegrin Parliament and the actual friction between the coalition partners may seriously complicate the functioning of the new government.

A long process of forming a new government. On September 9, 2020, shortly after the announcement of the results of the August parliamentary elections, the leaders of the three electoral lists (“For the future of Montenegro”, “Peace is our nation”, and “Black on White”) signed an agreement to form a joint government. They also announced the principles of future cooperation: continuation of NATO membership, continuation of the European integration process, undisputed recognition of Kosovo’s independence and not introducing changes to Montenegro’s national symbols. Moreover, shortly after the elections, the leaders of the three opposition coalitions agreed that the new government would be a government composed of experts.

The inaugural session of the new parliament took place on September 23. Aleksa Bečić, the leader of Democratic Montenegro (*Demokratska Crna Gora, DCG*), which was part of the “Peace is our nation” electoral list, was elected as the new speaker of parliament by 45 deputies. Members of the three election coalitions also asked the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, to entrust Zdravko Krivokapić with the mission of creating a new government. After receiving a mandate from the president (October 8), Z. Krivokapić announced that the new government would be formed within a month.

From the very beginning, Metropolitan Amfilohije, who played a key role in mobilizing the Montenegrin society during the last parliamentary elections, was strongly involved in the coalition talks. Due to the involvement of Metropolitan Amfilohije and Bishop Joanikije, on September 22 – before the inauguration of the new parliament – representatives of the three opposition electoral coalitions planning to establish a joint government of Montenegro met in the Ostrog monastery.

Z. Krivokapić invited representatives of minority parties to cooperate in the future government. However, both Bosnians and Albanians rejected this proposal, emphasizing the ideological discrepancies with the pro-Serb and pro-Russian Democratic Front (*Demokratski front, DF*), which is a key political party in the new ruling coalition. Finally, on November 5, 2020, Zdravko Krivokapić, designated for the office of prime minister, presented the names of candidates for ministerial positions in the new government of Montenegro.

Disputes between coalition partners. The illness and death of Metropolitan Amfilohije significantly slowed down the process of forming the new government. The delay was also influenced by disputes between the coalition partners. Despite previous arrangements regarding the appointment of a government of experts, the DF advocated a “classic” division of ministries according to the political key and the number of seats won. Moreover, he tried to distance himself from Z. Krivokapić, stressing that he was appointed the leader of the electoral list created by the Democratic Front by the metropolitan and not by the party leaders.

The way of conducting talks concerning the shape of the new government was particularly criticized strongly by Nebojša Medojević, the leader of the Movement for Change (*Pokret za promjenu*, PzP, part of the coalition “For the future of Montenegro”). Just before the parliamentary session, Medojević announced that he would support the new government in the vote but, at the same time, he emphasized that he did not know its program and did not participate in its development. The leaders of the Democratic Front also presented the same position.

Debate in parliament. The debate on a vote of confidence to the new government lasted three days in parliament – from December 2 to 4, 2020. For the first time in the history of Montenegrin parliamentarism, due to the pandemic situation, the MPs had the opportunity to vote online. On the first day of the session, Zdravko Krivokapić, designated as Prime Minister, delivered an exposé that he had actually presented to the Montenegrin public three days earlier (November 30). Over the next few days, there was an emotional discussion in parliament concerning the new government. Finally, on December 4, 70 of 81 deputies voted on the issue, with 41 voting in favor of the new government, 28 against it, and one abstaining. After the vote, the newly elected prime minister emphasized that the new government would only serve the citizens and, contrary to numerous accusations, was not a political experiment. Krivokapić declared that the government would run for the entire four-year term.

In his exposé, Z. Krivokapić emphasized that his government would focus on the citizens' needs and that he would act to rebuild social trust in state institutions. The priorities of the new government include, among others, the European integration and economic issues, including the green economy, carrying out digital transformation, and deepening regional cooperation. According to the prime minister's announcements, the fight against organized crime and corruption will be equally important.

In his exposé, Z. Krivokapić also drew attention to the inefficiency of the current health-care system. He also announced the liquidation of the National Coordinating Body for Infectious Diseases (*Nacionalno koordinaciono tijelo za zarazne bolesti*, NKT) and the creation of two separate institutions responsible for combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

In line with the pre-election announcements, the new prime minister expressed his intention to review all controversial laws – including the law on religious freedom. He also stated that it would be necessary to reform the electoral law. Z. Krivokapić further emphasized that in February 2021 the detailed government program for the next year will be presented.

Interestingly, both the opposition and the coalition partners criticized the presented exposé. Representatives of the parliamentary majority finally expressed their support for the government; however, they emphasized that apart from carrying out profound internal reforms, the currently prevailing Democratic Socialist Party should be held accountable. It is worth adding that President Đukanović, who was present in the parliament, expressed hope for constructive collaboration with the government. At the same time, he praised the previous government's achievements, primarily in the field of the economy and European integration.

The new government. The cabinet of Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić consists of 12 ministers (as opposed to the previous government's 17 ministers)¹. Most of the members of the government are not widely known to the public. The only deputy prime minister and the only member of a political party in the new government is Dritan Abazović. Z. Krivokapić symbolically compared the shape of the new government to the 12 apostles, whom he was constantly reminded of by Metropolitan Amfilohije. The new government, which, according to the assumptions of its founders, is a government of experts, is primarily to govern efficiently and strengthen citizens' trust in the state institutions. According to the prime minister's declaration, Luxembourg will be a model for Montenegro in this regard. Prime Minister Krivokapić also stressed that every Montenegrin citizen's right to equal treatment, regardless of religion or nationality, would be respected.

¹ The cabinet of Prime Minister Duško Marković consisted of 17 ministers, a minister without a portfolio, and three deputy prime ministers.

Relations with Serbia. The new government faces the need to improve relations with Serbia. There is no doubt that the protracted internal conflict in Montenegro over the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church (*Srpska pravoslavna crkva*, SPC) and the accompanying historical and political polemics between the authorities of Serbia, Montenegro, and the SPC have contributed to the deterioration of neighborly relations between the states.

The tensions in the relations between the two countries continued to rise several days before the new government's confidence vote. On November 28, 2020, the Montenegrin authorities decided to expel Serbia's ambassador, Vladimir Božović. The reason for the recognition as *persona non grata* was, in fact, the provocative statement of a diplomat who recognized the historic decision of the Podgorica Assembly (from 1918) to annex Montenegro to Serbia as an act of liberation and an expression of free will of the Montenegrin people. According to Montenegrin historiography, this event is defined as the illegal annexation of the Montenegrin state to Serbia. Moreover, in 2018 the Montenegrin Parliament adopted a special resolution canceling all decisions taken by the Assembly in 1918.

In reaction to the authorities' decision in Podgorica, Serbia initially decided to expel the Montenegrin ambassador, Tarzan Milosevic. Ultimately, however, the authorities in Belgrade withdrew from this decision. Serbia's position was supported by the Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, who called on Montenegro to change its decision to expel the ambassador, pointing to the need to improve neighborly relations in the region. Therefore, Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić will have to decide whether he upholds the previous government's position on the expulsion of the Serbian diplomat or withdraws from it.

The government coalition includes pro-Serbian groups; however, this does not mean an automatic improvement of the relationship. The influence of groups supporting rapprochement with Serbia will be hampered primarily by the URA. The fact that this impact will probably not be too great – and a fundamental change in the relations between Podgorica and Belgrade should not be expected – is probably evidenced by the statements of the Serbian President Alexander Vučić, who has repeatedly criticized the composition of the new Montenegrin government, pointing to the need for politicians from the Democratic Front to join it.

Conclusions. The new government of Montenegro is currently facing many challenges. The first will be to counteract the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. At the same time, it may turn out to be problematic to maintain strong support in society and the integrity of the government coalition itself. There is no doubt that the voters of the three electoral lists that are part of the government voted in favor of the opposition parties for various reasons. Some of them voted against the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, tired and disappointed with the long rule of this party. Others voted for the opposition to express their support for the Serbian Orthodox Church and to demonstrate opposition to the law on religious freedom. Due to the strong ties between Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić and the deceased metropolitan Amfilohije, it should be assumed that the new government will strive to introduce changes to the controversial law on freedom of religion as soon as possible.

In order to maintain the support of that part of society that was disappointed with the DPS rule, the new government will have to demonstrate concrete successes – primarily in the area of the economy, in strengthening the rule of law and accelerating the EU accession process. It should be emphasized that Montenegro's negotiations with the EU started in 2012. So far, Montenegro has only provisionally closed three (out of 35) chapters.

Montenegro's newly appointed government is made up of many different political actors and only has a minimal majority in parliament. This means that it will probably have to face serious internal challenges fairly quickly. This is evidenced by, for example, the harsh criticism of Prime Minister Krivokapić from the Democratic Front – the strongest political party in the new government, without its representatives in it.

Moreover, the new government will have to deal with the still strong Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, which has effectively controlled all state institutions over the last three decades. When assessing the prospects of the new government, it is also difficult to ignore the fact that Milo Đukanović – the de facto

leader of the DPS – will be the president of the state for the next three years. Finally, it is evident that the political position of Prime Minister Z. Krivokapić himself was weakened from the very beginning at the time of the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije, who successfully mobilized a significant part of society and worked to bring the opposition groups closer. It is not yet known who will become the new metropolitan and whether he will be the same charismatic, independent, and de facto influential figure in Montenegro as Metropolitan Amfilohije undoubtedly was.