

Montenegro's new government: the long-awaited stabilisation of the executive branch

Łukasz Kobeszko

On 31 October, after an all-night debate, the parliament of Montenegro passed a vote of confidence in the government of Milojko Spajić, who was appointed prime minister-designate in August. The new cabinet was supported by the coalition which was formed after early parliamentary elections on 11 June. This coalition includes the centrist Europe Now! (the largest party); some MPs belonging to two large electoral blocs, the pro-Serbian For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG) and the centre-liberal Democrats & United Action for Reform; the Socialist People's Party (SNP)-CIVIS; and two Albanian minority groups. Spajić's government will have a majority of 46 votes in the 80-seat chamber, while the strongest opposition grouping in parliament will be the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), which currently has 17 MPs.

The strongest position in the new coalition will be held by Europe Now. This group represents a generational political change in Montenegro, as it is mainly made up of people in their thirties and forties. In addition to the post of prime minister it has been given 10 ministries, including those of foreign affairs, European affairs, finance, justice and energy. The second largest party in the government will be the Democrats; they have been given two deputy prime-ministerhips coordinating the ministries of force & diplomacy and of justice (including anti-corruption), as well as the defence and interior ministries. The third deputy prime minister, who will oversee the work of the social ministries, comes from the SNP-CIVIS. Another part of the coalition agreement included the nomination of Andrija Mandić, who won his parliamentary seat from the ZBCG electoral list, as speaker of parliament. Until recently Mandić led the Democratic Front (DF) party; this was the most pro-Serbian group on Montenegro's political stage until it was formally dissolved this May, and was strongly opposed to a Euro-Atlantic orientation for the country. The agreement stipulates that Mandić's fellow party members (which includes some members of the ZBCG-New Serbian Democracy group) will be able to join the government coalition within the next year, if its representatives consider that the parties making up Spajić's cabinet are working together smoothly.

The most important challenges facing the new government include accelerating the country's European integration, strengthening its position as a reliable ally within NATO, pursuing a policy of good neighbourliness, and consolidating the state's finances, by means including reforms of the pension and health insurance systems.

Commentary

- The formation of Spajić's government – the first to be based on a stable parliamentary majority in several months – is the culmination of a process of political change that began as a result of the 2020 elections, which brought the long-standing rule of the DPS under Milo Djukanović to an end. While the two previous cabinets formed after those elections proved highly unstable (the previous cabinet of Dritan Abazović had been in power as a technical government since August 2022, when it lost a vote of no confidence), this year's presidential elections (in which the DPS and its leader were defeated) and the early parliamentary elections in June allowed for a thorough reconstruction of Montenegro's political scene.
- The formation of a new coalition after the 11 June elections was clearly difficult; the confidence vote was held just a few days before the constitutionally prescribed deadline for forming a new government. These delays were triggered by the still highly fragmented nature of the country's political scene. The strongest parliamentary groupings – Europe Now! and the DPS – cannot form an independent majority, and their capacity for forming coalition is limited. Moreover, some of the smaller parties entered parliament as part of larger blocs, but then formed separate groups among themselves. As a result, Spajić's government is effectively made up of eight groupings, all of which have diverse programmes and electorates, and which have hitherto only been united by their dislike of the DPS and its nearly 30-year rule. For example, the new cabinet does not include the United Action for Reform, which is in personal conflict with the politicians of Europe Now. The United Action for Reform party is associated with former prime minister Abazović, even though it entered parliament on a joint list with the Democrats, a party which now has members in the new cabinet. The months-long problems in establishing a parliamentary majority indicate that the new government may face numerous internal frictions. The creation of the posts of deputy prime minister – whose function is to coordinate cooperation among the representatives of the smaller coalition groupings – indicates an attempt to implement control mechanisms within the coalition's structure against the Europe Now! movement, which is the strongest member of the coalition. The most uncompromising opposition will certainly come from the DPS, whose MPs attempted to obstruct parliamentary proceedings during the confidence vote debate, and who have described the new cabinet as 'anti-European and pro-Russian'.
- In foreign policy, particularly the laborious process of European integration, the new government will try and keep Montenegro on the path towards deeper Euro-Atlantic orientation. This is demonstrated by the dominant position within the coalition held by the pro-European Europe Now and the Democrats, including their control of the ministries of defence and internal affairs. However, progress on the road to Euro-integration will also depend on continuing internal reforms (mainly the fight against corruption) and improving the justice system, as well as on consolidating public finances and actively attracting foreign investment. The previous cabinet did also make some efforts at reform, but these were limited due to its prolonged operation as a technical government. Foreign partners have expressed concern at the coalition agreement, which gave some influence over the functioning of the government majority to the MPs grouped around Mandić. He opposed Montenegro's declaration of independence in 2006, and in interviews with Russian media several years ago he stated that the country should leave NATO and withdraw its recognition of Kosovo's independence. He has also criticised

European sanctions against Russia, and has been a frequent guest on Serbian media as a political commentator. However, in the Montenegrin political system the post of parliamentary speaker which Mandić now holds is mainly ceremonial, and does not include any decision-making influence on foreign or defence policy. Nevertheless, pro-Serb MPs supporting the new government are likely to try and influence the Prime Minister to maintain Montenegro's close economic and regional cooperation with Belgrade.