

CIVIC

At the crossroads of decisions

By: Daliborka Uljarevic

Montenegro needs better government, but also a better alternative offer – a civil society with active citizens, not absent-minded followers of obsolete political ideas and strategies, without much genuine interest in political issues.

While we celebrated the sixth anniversary since the restoration of independence, the country writhed under a huge pile of accumulated problems that are partly the result of an already decadent constellation of political relations. The winning block captured the greatest political benefits of this historical event, fortifying them over the last few years by its commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. The opposition which mostly supported the state union with Serbia, and although at some point it accepted Montenegro's European integration as the only way to institute the rule of law in the country, actually lost part of its earlier influence and is practically unable to articulate the political space in Montenegro in a way that would ensure the basic tenet of a functioning democracy: the ability to replace the rulers in elections.

State institutions are still shaped by an ambiguous amalgam of party and state interest, which have been made one and the same by the ruling establishment. Unfortunately, the opposition failed to date to produce an adequate political platform to forge a political option that could constitute a credible alternative, capable of winning the elections. We will see whether the new political actors which are now taking shape will prove to be any more adept at this task.

The pressure to develop the institutions in the direction of independence, efficiency and professionalism, and to step up the pace of depoliticisation is mostly coming from the civil sector and international institutions. This pressure is already yielding some results, which are also reflected in the spring Report of the European Commission, regardless of how we read this document.

This opens a great new challenge for Montenegro – the beginning of negotiations with EU, which are expected to begin already in June. It is already clear that the accession talks will be marked by the difficult issues of corruption and organised crime, which are mostly dealt within Chapters 23 and 24, and which require development of two interlinked capacities. The first consists of the building of depoliticised and professional institutions in Montenegro, and the second – the ultimate consequence – is the establishment of the rule of law. The rule of law requires equality of all citizens before the law, which in our case means concretely the political will to completely remove politics from public institutions. Montenegro has yet to do a lot of work to develop efficient, effective judiciary, as well as the public administration overall. The negotiations are bound to be long and perhaps more demanding than for any other country to date.

The waves of scandals which are washing over the Montenegrin public, always remaining on the level of media sensationalism and speculations are the best testimony of the inability of Montenegrin institutions to fully implement the legal norms and investigate the allegations, searching for the evidence and ensuring respect for the principles of the protection of public interest. There is no place for the sacred cows, the law must be the same for all, including the current and the former highest public officials, their family members, loyal party activists and officers on the “secret” missions, regardless of the field in which they operate.

Over the last decade, Montenegro began to shed many taboos. This gradually resulted in a fruitful fight for the rights of ethnic communities, women, LGBT population, persons with disabilities. However, Montenegro still has to confront its greatest taboo: the taboo of omnipotence of the party in power, omnipotence of the leader. This taboo can only be broken by the strong, depoliticised institutions of the state of Montenegro, capable of effectively implementing the laws which are in line with the European legal standards.

The negotiations are a chance for Montenegro to construct a social system founded upon the rule of law. This is also the best platform for all other forms of prosperity, especially the economic one. But it

first requires some form of consolidation of the political scene, as well as further strengthening of the civic conscience.

Montenegro needs better government, but also a better alternative offer – a civil society with active citizens, not absent-minded followers of obsolete political ideas and strategies, without much genuine interest in political issues. It takes commitment and courage, constructive criticism and institutional strengthening, not a pamphleteering, *ad-hoc* approach that has been all too common until now.

Citizens of Montenegro, continuously bombarded by scandals without beginning or end, with questionable motifs and worse accuracy of information, can barely be surprised by anything, because the dynamic, chaotic social upheavals made everything routine. Perhaps the only positive, motivating surprise in it all would be a modicum of consistent cooperation between those who are committed to change, a general strategy and a vision of realistic, attainable goals. Or is that too avant-garde for the Montenegro we live in today?

The citizens now have a lot of responsibility that has been shunned by those who often decide in their name. They will soon have to show if they can and would bear it.

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