

CIVIC

## Elections in Montenegrin way

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Fifty days remain until the early parliamentary elections. Instead of clear political offers whose quality, content and consistency could serve as a guideline, the citizens of Montenegro are being offered a blame game between the party leaders and their loyal guards. Who are the political candidates in the end, and what programmes and guarantees are they offering? Apparently, all this will be revealed on the eve of the elections, as a grand political secret, from which we shouldn't have great expectations. But the main actors are not quietly bidding their time. They are spending the time of the electoral campaign on what they always did best – attacking each other, public and local slandering, instead of engaging in direct communication with the potential voters, listening to their fears and dilemmas and offering credible answers.

This is an unserious message to the voters, but also a logical sequel to a practice that the voters never managed to punish in the previous election cycles. The accent is again on the individual leaders, feeding and balancing between various individual and party appetites. This is all accompanied by reckless waste of limited energy, with massive disregard for formulating clear programmatic positions and taking a realistic, pragmatic and political stand. The situation is a consequence of our choice of the transition path. The relevant authors speak of two possibilities: one, a swift transition with a clear financial, developmental, institutional, as well as value and identity meaning for all we want to be and the kind of society we want to live in and invest in and another, so called muddling transition, with mafia and corruption, with shady links between politics and controversial individuals, with meanderings towards left and right and superficial promises of speed, with cohabitation of political actors without any grounding in ideological positions and minimum principles, in short – a slow, torturous and half-hearted process. The Montenegrin choice was and remains the second, “easier” option. No wonder – to embark on the clear path while building strong institutions we would need a lot of strength, courage, sacrifices, patience and skill, and the lack of all these is more than evident in what we now get as electoral offers, although the society's need for change was never stronger and more obvious.

Key political values, such as democracy, freedom and justice, market society, state-building and the balanced scope of state and political activities, which constitute the main fault lines between political actors in democratic countries are here forgotten categories, or discussed only in extreme circumstances and under pressure. Add to this the magic of European integration, which is readily used by all, as long as they stay out of the intricacies of this complex process. Capacity-building for democratisation of the Montenegrin society, the ability to take responsibility for the quality of European integration, should be the basis of all electoral strategies if they are to be sustainable and offer a credible alternative to the current government. These strategies should be presented to the citizens through an engaged dialogue, because the citizens are losing enthusiasm for integration which, paradoxically, they recognise as an excuse for political blame-games and chronic avoidance of the fundamental problems of Montenegro's captive institutions.

Too many of us still believe that the ills of organised crime and corruption can be cured and disappear overnight. As long as these beliefs hold, the only thing that is fast disappearing is the money of taxpayers, through various schemes of public procurement, privatization, contracted services etc. The public money, i.e. the money of the Montenegrin citizens, goes to the pockets of rich, incompetent local businessmen with links to the top officials. Institutions reined in by political influence only go as far in harmonizing our laws with EU standards as is necessary for a passing grade, but clearly not far enough to allow the EU standards to protect the citizens and prove that we are not living in a party state, or do anything to make the state stronger than the private-political entrepreneurs.

In this atmosphere, where all parties are labouring to show that the rules don't apply here, or apply to the extent that some allow them to apply, after short and unsuccessful negotiations within the opposition the discussion turned to proving that the number of seats in the Parliament is in fact irrelevant. In this, they all (un)consciously neglect the fact that in Montenegro everything depends on this number of seats. Namely, the number of seats reflects the level of political power, and if you win them you can occupy a whole little Montenegrin kingdom. Like in a board game. The seats are the measure of political power and many in the government and the opposition are willing to do anything to win the favour of the leader and secure a seat. This is the best indicator of the (lack of) democracy within our parties, but also of the profound crisis of the political system.

In this situation, supporting a boycott would not be unreasonable, but only upon a serious calculation of the amount of damage it would do to the "keepers of the keys" to this regime. I personally don't believe that this would be particularly hard for them. It is precisely the "keepers" who constantly boycott the institutions, and often do not even deign to hide their contempt for them.

This is why the opposition should work on harmonizing the positions of various actors, and aim at identifying the lowest common denominator, overcoming pride and laying down the rules that respect the positions of individuals and the groups they belong to – avoiding the frustration of defeat and the fatalistic conviction that it's "now or never". The Government will fall when everyone in Montenegro understands that regardless of the number of lists the opposition runs on they are all united in the purpose of deposing this government, and that the political condition for this is unlimited. Synergies arise when the citizens who are deciding on where to put their vote realise that all opposition representatives are sending the same message of change and hope for a more just society. When the message is that of frustration and outbursts of egoism, the government will never fall due to the efforts of the opposition, but only perhaps through a clash of interests between different fractions within the ruling coalition, which have often only been helped by the activities of those who hope to overthrow them.

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