Mechanisms of Dominance: Understanding 30 Years in Power of Montenegro’s Democratic Party of Socialists

Abstract: This article analyses the mechanisms that contributed to the 30-year predominance of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in Montenegro. The authors pay particular attention to the DPS’ programmatic flexibility, use of co-optation, repression and control, as well as clientelism, examining their role in shaping state–society relations and party competition over time. In doing so, the article also seeks to explain the DPS’ setback in the 2020 elections and the ongoing transition from a dominant party system towards a more competitive multiparty system.

Keywords: Montenegro, democracy, authoritarianism, Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)

Introduction

No other party in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe has been able to dominate the political scene of a country for as long as the Democratic Party of Socialists (Demokratska partija socijalista, DPS) in Montenegro. The party was in power continuously throughout the period of multiparty politics in Montenegro from 1990 to 2020. As the successor to the League of Communists of Montenegro (Savez komunista Crne Gore, SKCG), it did not change its name to DPS until 1991 after the first multiparty elections in December 1990. While a few successors to communist parties were able to hold on or return to power after 1990, none has ruled for anything close
to the three continuous decades of the DPS. Even after its narrow defeat in the parliamentary elections of 2020, the DPS still remained the largest single party in Montenegro. The party briefly supported a minority government in 2022 and its leader, Milo Đukanović, remained the state president until 2023.

In this article, we argue that the predominance of the DPS is based on a combination of mechanisms the party has adopted and finetuned during its 30-year rule, namely co-optation, repression and control, programmatic flexibility, and clientelism. The party has undergone several shifts, from being a dogmatic communist party to a strong supporter of the Serbian nationalist agenda of Slobodan Milošević to an advocate of NATO and a Montenegrin nation-builder. Throughout this time, the DPS has relied on public resources and its fusion with the state. As a dominant party, it skewed multiparty competition in its favour and used informal means to retain control. As such, it resembles dominant parties in other competitive authoritarian systems.

Dominant parties exist in a wide range of political systems, from democracies, such as Japan, ruled by the Liberal Democratic Party, to authoritarian systems like China dominated by the Communist Party (Bogaards and Boucek 2010, 8–10). Earlier research on Montenegro’s DPS has commonly divided the DPS’ rule into two periods, describing the period between 1990 and 1997 as competitive authoritarian. The beginning of the second period is demarcated by the DPS forming the first multiparty government in 1997, elevating Montenegro into the category of electoral democracies. Depending on the period, scholars identified different mechanisms to account for the DPS’ predominance. Whereas the party’s success until 1997 is generally explained by electoral manipulation, its control over media and state institutions, as well as its exploitation of public resources for patronage (Darmanović 2003, 147; Vuković 2013, 4–5), the DPS’ ongoing predominance after 1997 is seen as the result of the party’s high degree of institutionalization (Vuković 2013), ideological metamorphosis (Kovačević 2007; Vuković 2010), or its strategic alignment with the national cleavage that divides the Montenegrin and Serbian constituencies (Komar and Živković 2016). Each of these approaches has made its own contribution to solving the puzzle of the DPS’ 30-year predominance. That said, we consider a clear-cut delineation of regime periods to be somewhat misleading. Although the degree of political openness certainly increased after 1997, recent research has acknowledged the persistently undemocratic nature of the DPS’ rule, classifying Montenegro as a competitive authoritarian regime even beyond 1997 (Levitsky and Way 2021). Thus, this article aims to provide a comprehensive explanation for the DPS’ three decades of predominance, shedding light on sources of power that tend to be disregarded in the literature on dominant parties in (electoral) democracies.

In doing so, we engage with a body of literature that analyses dominant parties in authoritarian systems. Although, in his study of the dominant party in Mexico,
Kenneth F. Greene distinguishes between authoritarian and democratic dominant party regimes, this distinction turns out not to be entirely clear-cut. This is especially the case in the realm of “hybrid regimes”, such as “electoral democracies” and “electoral autocracies”, in which dominant parties draw on a similar combination of incentives and mechanisms to garner support and sideline contenders (Greene 2007, 258). In the following, we thus focus on accounts that have drawn on various explanatory models, establishing that the stability of authoritarian regimes ultimately rests on the interaction of several “pillars”, namely legitimation, repression, and co-optation (Gerschewski 2013; Gerschewski et al. 2013). The article builds on this framework, while refining two conceptual aspects: Firstly, we substitute “pillars” with the concept of “mechanisms”, as it is more mindful of fluctuations in intensity within and across authoritarian tools. Moreover, the notion of “mechanism” also accounts for variations in appearance. Mechanisms do not develop in isolation. They interact with their environment, assuming different shapes depending on the context in which they operate (Falleti and Lynch 2009). As this article will establish, although the DPS reconfigured and reshaped its mechanisms over the decades, they have essentially remained the same. Secondly, we distinguish between “co-optation”, as a horizontal mechanism for incorporating elites into the regime, and “clientelism”, as a vertical mechanism for generating broader societal support. The DPS’ 30-year rule has resulted in large sections of the population being deeply dependent on the party. Analysing clientelistic linkages separately is important to understand the societal equilibrium resulting from the DPS’ monopoly on patronage goods.

The most striking feature of the DPS’ 30 years in government is the apparent contradiction between continuity and change. Dominant parties can, in some cases, be mere vehicles or “voting machines” for autocrats, as United Russia is for Vladimir Putin. Or they might be well-institutionalized parties with regular changes in leadership, such as the Institutional Revolutionary Party during its 71 years in power (1929–2000) in Mexico or the African National Congress that has governed South Africa since 1994. The DPS has clearly been more than just a vehicle for a political leader, as it has included and balanced divergent factions and competing ideas. At the same time, it has also been dominated by the personality of Milo Đukanović, who has formally or de facto led the party since its creation. Đukanović had been part of the leadership of the League of Communists that came to power in 1989, going on to take full control after the intra-party power struggle in 1997. In April 2023, Đukanović stepped down as party leader for the first time after his defeat in the 2023 presidential elections. To what extent he will continue to hold the reins of the DPS in the background remains to be seen. Thus, the ability of the party to generate a successful transfer of leadership has not yet been put to a conclusive test. On two occasions Đukanović held no other office than that of party president. The first time was between 2006 and 2008 with Željko Šturanović taking on the position of prime
The second time was between 2010 and 2012 when Igor Lukšić served as prime minister. At the end of both periods, Đukanović returned to political office, indicating his importance for the political system and his party.

Throughout its 30 years in power, the vote share of the DPS has been remarkably steady, with the party winning between 125,578 and 171,316 votes. If the first two elections, which were outliers, are excluded, the overall variation in voter support was only 26,565 votes, or less than 20% of the party’s total number of votes (Table 1). This stability is particularly striking bearing in mind the dramatic shifts Montenegro experienced during that period, including the wars in neighbouring Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, Montenegro’s independence in 2006, and its ongoing Euro-Atlantic integration. It was not until August 2020 that the party finally lost an election for the first time. Hence, studying the DPS can teach us about both the adaptability and the limitations of dominant parties.

In the following, we will highlight the main mechanisms for the DPS’ predominance, illustrating how co-optation, repression and control, programmatic flexibility, and clientelism sustained the party’s long-lasting hold on power. We conclude by discussing the factors underlying the DPS’ electoral defeat in August 2020 and the challenges that the party’s 30-year legacy poses for the political system.

### Table 1: Vote share of the DPS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Vote</th>
<th>Vote in %</th>
<th>Seats in parliament</th>
<th>% of seats in parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>171,316</td>
<td>56.16</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>125,578</td>
<td>43.78</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>150,237</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>170,080</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>153,946</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>167,166</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>164,737</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>50.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>168,290</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>165,380</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>158,490</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>44.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>143,515</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: For 1990–2002, Bieber (2003); for 2006–2020, Državna izborna komisija Crna Gora, Za izbor poslanika u Skupštinu Crne Gore, n.d., https://dik.co.me/izbori/za-izbor-poslanika-u-skupstini-crne-gore/ (accessed 12 April 2023).<sup>a</sup> In coalition with the NS and SDP. <sup>b</sup> In coalition with the SDP (until 2012). The DPS also included smaller parties in preelection coalitions.
Co-optation

Co-optation is one of the key factors in the DPS’ long-standing predominance. Co-optation refers to the process of tying strategically important actors to a particular organization, party, or regime by investing them with a stake in the survival of the co-opting authority. The term co-optation originates from organizational theory and was coined by Philip Selznick (1949). Since the early 2000s, it has become an important concept in the research on autocratic regimes. Co-optation has been identified as a crucial mechanism underpinning autocratic institutions. It also lies at the heart of socioeconomic explanations of autocratic stability (Gandhi 2008; Wintrobe 1998). Co-optative relationships build on the reciprocal flow of material and immaterial goods: dominant parties can share the spoils of power, e.g. patronage goods, political offices, or policy concessions. In return, the ruling party gets access to essential resources, such as organizational structures, mobilization capacity, or economic commodities. These transactions translate into interdependencies or mutual loyalties, thereby curtailing the formation of independent power centres.

The DPS employed both formal and informal modes of co-optation. We define the former as relationships between legal organizations, including parties or administrative units, and the latter as informal allegiances between individuals and their extended networks. It should be noted, however, that informal co-optation shows some overlap with clientelism. Yet, whereas the concept of clientelism is defined as an electoral phenomenon, focusing on the asymmetric relationship between patron and client, co-optation also denotes relationships between actors of equal rank. Thus, we will focus on analysing the relationship between the DPS and political parties, international actors, the (grey) economy, as well as religious and civil society representatives. As we will show, the DPS not only incorporated but also excluded certain groups of actors at opportune moments, allowing the party to switch allies at critical points in time.

Political Parties

As the successor to the League of Communists of Montenegro—officially dissolved in June 1991—the DPS inherited the vast party infrastructure, including the party’s membership base, the state media, real estate, and control over large segments of the economy. From the outset, this allowed the DPS to staff posts in state and civic institutions with hand-picked loyalists (Darmanović 2003, 147). In 1992, Montenegro opted to remain in a state union with Serbia, then named the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). It was created on 27 April 1992 as the successor of the Socialist
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which had *de facto* ceased to exist by that time. The decision was taken by the only remaining delegates to Yugoslavia’s Federal Chamber, those from Montenegro and Serbia (Goati 2001, 54). But the relationship between Belgrade and Podgorica was not without tension. The republican leaders differed in terms of their preferred approach to the UN sanctions, economic reforms, and power-sharing on the federal level (Bieber 2003, 18; Goati 2001, 53, 61). Eventually, this conflict drove a rift between the highest echelons of the DPS. Whereas Montenegro’s president Momir Bulatović was primarily accountable to Belgrade, prime minister Milo Đukanović aligned himself with domestic interests. Đukanović’s more independent line found support among the DPS’ most influential members, who ousted Bulatović from the position of party chair in July 1997 (Morrison 2018, 73). Đukanović’s faction of the DPS took over the party’s infrastructure. Bulatović, on the other hand, founded a new party, the Socialist People’s Party (*Socijalistička narodna partija*, SNP), which was being squeezed into an even closer alliance with Milošević. The DPS’ split has had an enduring impact on Montenegro’s party system, dividing it into a pro-independence or pro-Montenegrin, self-proclaimed “civic” bloc, and a Serb nationalist, formerly unionist camp. At this early stage, however, the alignment with Milošević was the main line of fragmentation.

Ever since, the DPS has relied on the support of pro-Montenegrin and minority parties to secure a parliamentary majority. In turn, the DPS’ coalition partners have profited from the considerable perks associated with holding political offices and the DPS’ concession to state sovereignty and Euro-Atlantic integration. Given that Serbian nationalist parties constituted the largest opposition to the DPS, alliances between pro-Montenegrin and minority parties and the DPS were often motivated by a fear of the political alternative. Yet, the trade-off between long-term objectives and short-term goals has left its mark on the DPS’ coalition partners, turning them into arenas of infighting and shrinking electoral support. For instance, the Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (*Liberalni savez Crne Gore*, LSCG), one of the figureheads of the anti-war and pro-independence movement of the 1990s, fell apart in the early 2000s in a conflict over whether to support the DPS in its turn towards independence or maintain its own independent position. Similarly, in 2016, the aspiring opposition party Positive Montenegro (*Pozitivna Crna Gora*, PCG), lost its electoral base after supporting prime minister Đukanović in a vote of no confidence. In turn, the PCG received government offices and the post of the speaker of the parliament (Tomović 2016a, 2016b). Another example is the recent rift in the DPS’ long-standing partner, the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija*, SDP), over differences regarding the DPS’ involvement in corruption and illicit privatization schemes. In 2015, the SDP split into two, with one faction, the Social Democrats (*Socijaldemokrate*, SD), remaining loyal to Đukanović (Janković 2015). The DPS’ co-optation of a significant share of pro-Montenegrin parties has fragmented Montenegro’s party system.
and divided parties’ vote shares, thereby impeding the formation of an alternative large-tent “civic” party.

The DPS has also relied on the enduring support of national minority parties. Favoured by positive discrimination through electoral laws, minority parties have been an important building block of every DPS-led government since 1998. Yet, it is important to note that their representation in government hardly translated into meaningful legislation. Research on the performance of Albanian minority parties has shown that their impact on decision-making has been remarkably limited. Thus, many of the core issues faced by minority communities in the areas of economic opportunity, education, representation, and the use of language have remained unresolved (Čaušević 2020).

International Actors

Western countries were important allies of Đukanović’s DPS. Following the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and thereby also the international isolation of the FRY, Đukanović and his associates established closer ties to the West. Relations with the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) created an alternative to Montenegro’s reliance on Serbia and thus served as a trope in Đukanović’s power struggle with Bulatović. These ties were deepened in 1998 after Montenegro declared neutrality in the Kosovo war, a step that effectively severed political and economic relations between Podgorica and Belgrade. Western actors recognized Đukanović as an important counterweight to Milošević. The EU and the US supported his government financially during Serbia’s freeze of fiscal and customs transfers to Montenegro. Western financial assistance to Montenegro started at the beginning of the Kosovo war and increased considerably over the course of the conflict. In 2000 alone, Western aid amounted to over 90 million US dollars (Bieber 2003, 34). This enabled the government to make regular pension payments and maintain comparatively high wages in Montenegro, boosting Đukanović’s domestic popularity and Montenegro’s economic autonomy from Serbia (Huszka 2003, 43–6, 54). Foreign assistance was thus crucial in enabling Montenegro’s de facto independence until it became de jure independent in 2006.

Nonetheless, relations with the West were also an important normative resource for the DPS. The decline of Milošević and his indictment by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1999 increased popular support for European integration. Thus, the DPS was eager to establish itself as the preferred interlocutor. Crucial steps in this development were Milo Đukanović’s public apology in 2000 for Montenegro’s involvement in the military operation against Croatia in 1991, the cooperation of Montenegro’s government with the ICTY, its recognition of
Kosovo’s independence in 2008, and the DPS’ inclusion of minority parties in government. Under the leadership of the DPS, Montenegro was granted EU candidate status in 2010 and NATO membership in 2017. Despite the EU’s criticism of Montenegro’s modest reform progress, it has mostly remained silent on the DPS’ undemocratic practices, given the EU’s interest in regional stability and Đukanović being a reliable partner, especially when it comes to Montenegro’s foreign policy and bilateral relations in the region (Bieber 2017).

(Grey) Economy

In the 1990s, Montenegro’s economy was forced to its knees by hyperinflation, unemployment, and the loss of the Yugoslav market. Combined with the international isolation brought on by the UN sanctions against the FRY (1992–1996), these conditions provided fertile ground for a flourishing grey economy (Đurić 2003). Controlling all key levers of state and economic power, the DPS facilitated a burgeoning market for credit schemes, shell companies, and smuggling (Đurić 1999; Uzelac 2003). In doing so, the party created a loyal class of businesspeople. Irregular privatization provided an additional means of rewarding the DPS’ closest allies. In return, this group of nouveaux riches acted as a sponsor of the DPS’ split from Milošević and of Montenegrin independence (Goati 2001, 157).

From the early 2000s on, Montenegro saw a steep increase in privatization and foreign direct investment. During this period, Montenegro’s largest enterprises and coastal properties were earmarked for tenders. These transactions were often prepared in secrecy, enabling underpriced acquisitions by investors with close ties to high-ranking officials. Examples include the privatization of Telekom Montenegro, the Aluminium Plant Podgorica, and the Montenegrin energy company Elektroprivreda Crna Gora (Čeranić 2015). Prva Banka (First Bank), a private bank owned by Aleksandar “Aco” Đukanović, brother of Milo, was instrumental in facilitating pre-agreed deals by issuing favourable loans to dubious businessmen with close relations to the DPS (Patručić 2014; Patručić and Milovac 2014). Classified investment schemes, such as the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development or the Chinese One Belt One Road Initiative, also gave “friendly” businesses preferential treatment. Privatizations and public tenders allowed many who had been involved in illegal trade during the 1990s to legitimize their economic gains and take control of domestic monopolies. Loyal tycoons served as important DPS donors and intermediaries in the party’s patronage machine.
The Serbian Orthodox Church

Relations between the DPS and other societal actors were far less stable and tended to be occasional alliances, often of a pragmatic nature. Yet, they were no less crucial for shoring up support for the DPS at critical moments. One example is the ambivalent relationship between the DPS and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro. In 1997, the late archbishop Amfilohije Radović officially endorsed Đukanović’s anti-Milošević line, a reaction to Belgrade cutting ties with Bosnian Serb leaders in 1994 (Morrison and Zdravkovski 2014, 250). In 2006, despite Amfilohije’s pro-unionist stance, the SOC then kept surprisingly quiet during the DPS’ campaign for independence. In turn, the DPS conceded to the illegal construction of churches by the SOC, for example at the coastal resort and former fishing village of Sveti Stefan (Morrison and Zdravkovski 2014, 250). Apart from disagreements on certain issues, such as the recognition of Kosovo’s independence or NATO membership, the DPS was careful to remain on good terms with Amfilohije; not least as many DPS supporters identify with the SOC (Đžankić 2013, 421). Nonetheless, the DPS failed to fully co-opt the SOC and its attempts to transform the SOC in Montenegro into an independent church eventually fell flat in the face of the SOC’s resistance (Vijesti 2020).

Yet, in 2019, the contentious Law on Freedom of Religion led to a complete breakdown of the relationship between the DPS and the SOC. According to the law, the property of religious groups could be transferred to the state unless the SOC and other groups could prove that they owned these properties before 1918. It is not entirely clear why the DPS chose to antagonize the SOC, or whether this was even the intention. Rumours circulating among the opposition suggested that the DPS had planned to seize a coastal plot owned by the SOC. Other sources posit that the law was issued to stir up national tensions ahead of the elections in order to radicalize the pro-Serbian bloc and scare off those voters and pro-Montenegrin parties inclined to step out of the DPS’ orbit (Maksimović 2020). Again, other sources concede that the law had first been submitted to the Venice Commission in 2015 for revisions; the Commission’s approval and the government’s adoption of the law in 2019 was thus merely a matter of unfortunate timing (Šćepanović 2019). What seems to be clear, however, is that both the DPS and the SOC were caught off guard by the wave of public support for the church. Under the slogan “We will not give away our churches!”, the SOC spearheaded weekly processions (litije) joined by thousands of citizens, opposition figures, representatives of other religious communities, and even some lower ranked DPS officials (Softić 2020).
Repression and Control

Dominant parties can turn state organs into instruments of repression and control. Repression is a mechanism for disincentivizing oppositional activities. Coercive measures can include sanctions against individuals and organizations, constraints on political rights, such as freedom of speech or the right to vote freely, and even physical violence against opposition actors (Levistky and Way 2010, 58). Formally independent institutions, such as oversight bodies or courts, can serve to oversee state prosecution and access to justice. As we will show, the DPS used its position to staff the judiciary and impartial oversight bodies with loyalists. In doing so, the party influenced the jurisdiction to its own benefit, e.g. to persecute critics, control the media, or avoid accountability for its frequent violations of the law.

During the crisis-ridden early 1990s, the DPS retained complete control over formally independent institutions and the state-owned media (Darmanović 2003, 147). Since then, Montenegro has seen incremental reforms. The first were stipulated by an agreement between the DPS and the opposition following the party split in 1997. The political, judicial, and media infrastructure were further reconfigured in the course of state independence in 2006, Montenegro’s application for EU membership in 2010, and the start of accession talks with the EU in 2012. The latter in particular led to noticeable progress in the fight against organized crime and corruption, albeit largely limited to improved laws with little to be shown when it came to implementation. During the course of EU accession talks, new institutions have been established, including the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption and the Special State Prosecutor’s Office. However, the DPS’ key mechanisms for exercising control essentially remained the same—merely taking on a different shape.

Reports from the European Commission (2020) and Freedom House (2020) document the DPS’ continuing political influence on the work of the judiciary and anticorruption institutions although Montenegro has opened all chapters in the accession negotiations with the European Union. The European Commission repeatedly pointed to the lack of independence of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, founded in 2016 to fight corruption and monitor political party financing. From 2016 to 2020, the head of the Agency for Prevention of Corruption was Sreten Radonjić, who had close ties to then prime minister Duško Marković (Marovic and Muk 2016). Another example is Zoran Jelić, one of the main actors in the 2013 “audio recording affair”, who was subsequently appointed as a member of the Senate of the State Audit Institution (Ćalović, Milovac, and Maraš 2014). These and other examples (see also the section on clientelism) suggest that legislative reforms had little impact on the ground. Moreover, almost all high-level scandals went unpunished; one of the rare exceptions being the case of former DPS vice president Svetozar Marović who
was accused of leading a criminal group within the municipality administration of
the city of Budva, the investigation of which resulted in a plea agreement. However,
there is reason to assume that the Marović case was less motivated by the desire to
fight corruption than to settle scores within the ruling party (Tomović 2015). More
than six years since the plea agreement and issue of an international arrest warrant,
Marović is still living abroad and beyond the reach of Montenegro’s judiciary.

More frequently, high-level corruption cases remain unpunished. One example
is the so-called “envelope affair”, a documented case of illegal financing of the DPS.
The incident became public due to a video released by a local tycoon, the president of
the Atlas Group, Duško Knežević, showing himself handing an envelope containing
97,500 euros to the then mayor of Podgorica, Slavoljub Stijepović, ahead of the 2016
parliamentary elections (Politikon Network 2019). Knežević claims to have acted in
agreement with DPS president Milo Đukanović. Due to public pressure, Stijepović
was tried for money laundering, not corruption, but the proceedings against him
were eventually dropped due to a “lack of evidence” (DAN 2021).

The opposition, in contrast, has been repeatedly targeted in seemingly politically
motivated trials. Two leaders of the Democratic Front (Demokratski front, DF) were
convicted by a first instance verdict (Tomović 2019) for an alleged coup d’état in 2016;
although the case was later remanded for retrial (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2021). On
the day of the 2016 parliamentary elections, the government announced that security
forces had foiled a coup attempt plotted by the two DF leaders in collaboration with
two alleged Russian intelligence agents. The two opposition leaders claimed the DPS
had fabricated the coup attempt to influence the election’s outcome. Similarly, in
2006, just one day before the parliamentary elections, the police arrested 17 people
for “threatening the constitutional order and security of Montenegro” and “endan-
gering lives, property, religious, and cultural facilities in Tuzi and Malesija” (Kliker
2006). Even though these individuals were sentenced by the High Court of Podgorica,
some Albanian politicians claimed that “Operation Eagle’s Flight” as it was known
was fabricated to “intimidate the Albanian population before the elections” (PCNEN
2006).

The DPS’ relationship with the independent media and civil society has been
equally precarious. In the early 1990s, the DPS relied on the state media, including the
broadcaster Radio Televizija Crne Gore (RTCG) and daily newspaper Pobjeda
(Freedom House 2015), whereas private media, mostly limited in their reach, were
associated with Montenegro’s anti-war and pro-independence movement. A tem-
porary alliance with independent media and civil society representatives was struck
after the DPS broke with Milošević. This backing was important for the DPS to
establish a new image as a pro-Western and, eventually, pro-independence force.
Following state independence in 2006, however, the majority of independent media
outlets and nongovernmental organizations took a critical stance towards the DPS
Media freedom has always been a cause for concern due to the DPS’ long-standing control over the public broadcaster and its links to a number of private media outlets, which created an uneven playing field. At the same time, independent journalists who covered sensitive issues, such as corruption cases and links between the DPS and organized crime groups, fell victim to physical attacks. At least 85 attacks on journalists have been registered since 2004 according to a 2019 report by the Commission for Monitoring Investigations of Attacks on Journalists (Martinović 2020). In 2004, Duško Jovanović, editor-in-chief of the pro-opposition newspaper DAN, was killed in front of the newspaper’s offices; his murder remains unsolved. Journalist Olivera Lakić was even attacked twice, the first time in 2012, the second time with a shot to the leg in 2018. Lakić has long investigated and reported on cigarette smuggling in the north of the country, specifically on the involvement of state officials. Đukanović and his family members have repeatedly pressed damaging defamation charges against the independent media. In the last ten years, there have been roughly 150 cases against journalists before the Montenegrin courts for defamation (Sindikat medija Crne Gore 2020). Independent and opposition media, such as Vijesti, Monitor, and DAN, have been forced to pay several hundred thousand euros in damages in defamation cases over the years. In 2011, defamation was eventually completely removed from the Criminal Code and has since been treated as a civil litigation.

The RTCG is state financed, its editorial independence and institutional autonomy is stipulated by law (Government of Montenegro 2008). Given its continuity in power, the DPS has consistently controlled the editorial policy of public service broadcasters, resulting in greater airtime and overall coverage for the DPS vis-à-vis its competitors, as evidenced by reports by domestic and foreign media monitoring organizations (OSCE 2013). Another tool used by the DPS has been the lack of transparency in the distribution of funds for financing the media and advertising of state bodies (Nenezić and Popović 2015). Before the parliamentary elections in October 2016, the Agreement on the Conditions for Free and Fair Elections was signed by the majority of Montenegro’s parties. It became the basis of the so-called “Government of Electoral Trust”, an experiment that involved a number of representatives of the opposition in preparations for the upcoming elections. Its work was focused on electoral reforms, such as the prevention of the misuse of public resources for vote buying. For the two years following this experiment, the editorial policy of RTCG improved to some extent. Yet, in 2018, the DPS resorted to dismissing the broadcaster’s general manager and editor through the RTCG Council (Safety of Journalists Platform 2018). Prior to the dismissal, other members of the Council, mostly independent academics and civil society representatives, had been illegally removed from the RTCG, which was later confirmed by court decisions (Human Rights Action 2020; Prelević 2020).
While cooperation between the government and civil society organizations (CSOs) has improved under the auspices of EU conditionality, the space for CSO activities remains limited. Representatives of CSOs have been repeatedly branded as traitors or political careerists by the Montenegrin president and other DPS members (Rudović 2018). And some CSOs have been the subjects of smear campaigns by government-controlled media. Especially critical CSO representatives have been deprived of their positions on various councils and oversight bodies, including the council of the public broadcaster RTCG and the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, and replaced with individuals close to the authorities.

As illustrated, throughout its time in power, the DPS continued to actively marginalize and even suppress opposition parties, independent media, and critical civil society voices. It has indiscriminately targeted actors across the national cleavage, reducing its support in the pro-Montenegrin camp, while further radicalizing the pro-Serbian opposition. Moreover, Western actors have become increasingly critical in view of the attacks on independent journalists and CSO activists (OSCE 2014).

**Programmatic Flexibility**

Since its establishment in the early 1990s, the DPS has been characterized by both significant programmatic shifts and a broad and flexible ideological orientation. At first glance, the DPS would seem to be a centre-left party, as indicated by its name, its membership in the Socialist International and Progressive Alliance, as well as its association with the Party of European Socialists. It has been shaped by three institutional legacies that, taken together, have resulted in a party that is both specific in its aims and yet programmatically broad. First, it is a successor of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. This continuity provided the party with institutional resources, a strong membership, and programmatic legacies. Second, given its close alliance with the Socialist Party of Serbia until 1997, it also demonstrated a strong nationalist and pro-Serbian orientation and maintained ties with Serbia throughout the decade-long dissolution of Yugoslavia. Third, the DPS became a “state-building party”, i.e. a party closely associated with nation-building and the formation of a new state, much like other post-independence parties in the successor states to Yugoslavia.

Besides these legacies, the party has been given a wide range of ideological labels, from socialist to neoliberal, from pro-Serb to Montenegrin nationalist, from social democratic to populist, and from authoritarian to pro-European. Not only do these ascriptive labels cover a wide spectrum, many of them are contradictory or even mutually exclusive. As a party that has been governing continuously between
1945 and 2020, the DPS is inherently technocratic, accommodating elites who support it, first and foremost, for the access it provides to political offices, thus appearing pragmatic when it comes to its programme or ideology.

Other successor parties of the League of Communists have largely followed a similar trajectory. In Slovenia, Croatia, and North Macedonia, these parties identified as social democratic parties, as reflected in their names: the Social Democrats (Socialni demokrati, SD) in Slovenia, the Social Democratic Party in Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske, SDP), and the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija, SDSM) in North Macedonia. The Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Socijaldemokratska partija Bosne i Hercegovine, SDP BiH) falls into a similar category, but its success has been limited due to the high level of ethnonational fragmentation of its main electorate in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although there are some differences, these parties have held broadly similar positions. The main alternative trajectory has been that of the Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička partija Srbije, SPS), which maintained close ties with the DPS until 1997. The SPS did not transform into a social democratic party in the early 1990s, but instead remained formally committed to socialism, reluctantly accepting multiparty politics and endorsing a strong ethnonationalist agenda under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević. During the 2000s, after the end of the party’s decade-long rule, it somewhat softened its nationalist line and was accepted into the Socialist International in 2008. It still maintains its strong ties to Russia and continues to represent conservative and nationalist positions. As a successor party to the League of Communists, the DPS resembled the SPS during its initial period (1991–1997). After the intra-party power struggle between pro-Milošević and anti-Milošević factions, in which the former lost, the DPS shifted programmatically in the direction of the prevailing trend of social democratic parties.

What sets the DPS apart from most other successor parties is its role in state-building. After its break with Milošević, not only did the DPS gradually begin to depart from its Serbian sister party in terms of policy, but it also started to advance Montenegrin institutions. After 2001, the DPS began to openly advocate for state independence. The party adopted the separatist programme of smaller pro-independence parties, first and foremost the Liberal Alliance, which also emphasized the promotion of a distinct Montenegrin nation, in contrast to Serbian national identity. Following independence in 2006, the DPS enthusiastically promoted key aspects not only of state-building, but also of nation-building. The Montenegrin language was recognized in the 2007 constitution and new rules of grammar and standardization introduced two new letters. The goal of promoting Montenegrin nation-building by promoting the Montenegrin language was reiterated in the 2021 party programme, in which the party expresses its commitment to continue to foster
Another aspect of nation-building concerned the church. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is the dominant church among Orthodox believers in Montenegro. Since the early 1990s, a small Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) has been active, but was recognized only as a civil society organization until 2019. Due to the SOC’s strong Serbian nationalist orientation, it is naturally hostile to Montenegrin nation-building. Yet, given its strong influence among Montenegro’s majority population, the DPS repeatedly sought to tie the SOC more firmly to the regime. The Law on Freedom of Religion, passed in late 2019, has been perceived by many as an attempt to curtail the SOC’s independence after negotiations about the formation of an independent church in Montenegro between the DPS and late archbishop Amfilohije Radović had fallen flat due to the latter’s resistance. Whereas the law did not advance the MOC, it did include clauses that could have potentially deprived the SOC of some of its properties, which was viewed by the church and many of its supporters as an attempt to take power away from the SOC. Interestingly, around the same time, the DPS entered into an ideological conflict with the SOC. In 2019, during its 8th party congress, the DPS openly endorsed the establishment of a Montenegrin Orthodox Church for the first time. In his speech, Milo Đukanović outlined that the party “has understanding for the expectations of a part of our public to renew the historically incontrovertible Montenegro Orthodox Church based on procedures grounded on civic and canonical rules and principles” (DPS 2019). The endorsement of a Montenegrin Orthodox Church was also incorporated into the party statute and programme and put an end to the long years of peaceful coexistence and cooperation with the SOC which had left the MOC in a marginalized position. The 2021 party programme states that “the right of Montenegrin believers to an independent Orthodox Church operating on the territory of Montenegro is understood by the DPS as a constitutive element of their historic rights, which we will continuously affirm in a tolerant and planned manner, respecting the rules that exist for global Orthodoxy” (DPS 2021a). This careful endorsement of a separate Orthodox Church reflects the DPS’ incremental approach to Montenegrin nation-building. The party faced a divided electorate, and many of its voters spoke Serbian and identified with the SOC, rather than the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. As a result, the party has only gradually adopted these policies. Other nation-building parties have usually been more explicit in their nation- and state-building endeavours, such as the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ) in Croatia. There is no single catalyst that explains this gradual shift. One factor might lie with the DPS’ internal marginalization of the more pragmatic and pro-Serb officials, or the declining support of the party, which lent more weight to the smaller parties in the ruling coalition that were more hostile towards the SOC. The dynamics of nation-
building and the presence of a strong political and social actor outside of the regime’s control might also have contributed to this process.

Finally, the programmatic orientation of the DPS has been shaped by it being a dominant party. Most literature on dominant parties focuses on non-programmatic aspects of their predominance (Reuter 2017; Scheiner 2005). However, the party programme matters. Such parties tend to become a “catchall incumbent that [holds] the political center” (Greene 2007, 285). This is indeed the trajectory of the DPS, which has been characterized by vague core values and principles (Đžankić and Keil 2017). The DPS is seen as a populist party that draws on populist tools to justify its clientelist control over state resources. However, it has been unable to draw on typical populist themes, such as anti-elite sentiment, since the DPS itself has continuously constituted the very same elite, nor has it adopted an ethnonationalist rhetoric (Đžankić and Keil 2017). In fact, it has relied on minority parties and positioned itself as a supporter of a multiethnic Montenegro, at least since the late 1990s, making this part of the redefinition of “Montenegrinness” it promotes (Đžankić 2014).

However, the DPS’ programmatic development extended beyond a large-tent programme. Some of its policies appear exclusionary and have thus drawn only limited support. For example, the party advocated independence at a time when support for this was far from overwhelming. Similarly, NATO membership and the confrontation with the Serbian Orthodox Church was not endorsed by a majority either. In fact, the latter was a key factor in the party’s defeat in the 2020 parliamentary elections. There are two potential explanations as to why the DPS supported policies that would jeopardize rather than secure majority support. First, certain policies, such as NATO membership were aimed at creating international legitimacy for the DPS. Given that Montenegro is a small country dependent on external support, including funding and tourism, such considerations may matter (Bieber 2020, 98–105).

Second, Greene has argued that the dominant party systems promote “niche-oriented” opposition parties “that were either relatively extremist on the main partisan dimensions of competition or campaigned on less salient issues” (Greene 2007, 295). In the case of Montenegro, divisive issues such as NATO membership or the role of the Church have radicalized the opposition, but also divided it. Montenegro’s Orthodox majority has become increasingly split into those identifying as Montenegrins and those identifying as Serbs (Jenne and Bieber 2014). These divisions have historical roots, but have been reinforced by the nation- and state-building process since 1991 (Đukanović 2014). As Komar and Živković point out, the DPS has been using the polarization of Montenegro’s electorate into a Montenegrin and a Serb-oriented camp to its advantage. Rather than capturing the middle ground, it has clearly dominated the Montenegrin electorate. Thus, “[b]y monopolizing the ‘Montenegrin’ side, the DPS makes it almost impossible for the opposition to unite
and build a coalition strong enough to jeopardize its rule” (Komar and Živković 2016, 796) In fact, this strategy appeared to work in 2020, when the opposition ran in three different coalitions representing varying positions on the issue of Serb versus Montenegrin identity. Only with a pre-agreed ceasefire between the opposition camps and their willingness to form a post-electoral coalition did it prove possible to overcome the national polarization.

The DPS adhered to its “Montenegrin” position even after its electoral defeat in 2020. At the 9th party congress, president Đukanović announced that there was “no civic and European Montenegro without a strong and progressive DPS” (DPS 2021b). With this statement, Đukanović suggests that Montenegro’s existence would be threatened were the DPS not in power and that the party constitutes the only alternative to Greater Serbian nationalism. This is not to deny the fact that pro-Serb parties have maintained close ties with Serbia. What it does indicate, however, is that the DPS has not sought to mitigate the national cleavage, but rather reinforce it. Yet, in doing so, the DPS has increasingly antagonized not only pro-Serbian parties, but also Montenegro’s Serbian electorate. This trajectory eventually reduced the DPS’ capacity for coalition building and isolated the party, especially in light of its opponents’ readiness to bridge the national divide.

**Clientelism**

Finally, the DPS’ strong and steady voter support cannot be fully understood without reference to clientelism. Clientelism can be defined as a reciprocal and asymmetric relationship based on the transaction of goods and services for votes (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2010). While various political systems feature clientelism, dominant party systems can turn clientelism into an obstacle to voters’ free choice. The absence of robust competition allows dominant parties to exploit state resources, such as assets or jobs, turning public administrations into political machines (Grzymala-Busse 2008). The resource asymmetry in dominant party systems can pervert the principle of democratic accountability (Stokes 2005): “Rather than voters holding parties and politicians accountable for their performance, it is parties and politicians that hold voters accountable for their vote” (Hicken 2011, 292).

In the following, we identify the main commodities, target groups, and channels involved in the clientelist transactions between the DPS and its electorate. We differentiate between *private goods* and *club goods* (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2010). Private goods are used to reward individuals and include commodities such as jobs, social insurance benefits, or money. Club goods, on the other hand, target a selected subset of citizens through tax redistribution or welfare benefits. The crucial difference between the latter and universally accessible public goods is that club goods
concentrate “a high proportion of benefits on a critical mass of voter constituencies” (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2010, 12).

Although elections in Montenegro are regular and more often than not deemed competitive, so far none have been without irregularities and misuse of public resources for vote buying. Civil society activists had long pointed to the DPS’ abuse of public resources, especially during election years and the so-called “audio recording affair” of 2013 confirmed these allegations beyond doubt. In 2012, the opposition daily newspaper DAN published transcripts of a session of the DPS council exposing the party for deliberately using employment in the public administration and state-owned enterprises to secure the votes of the newly employed and their families (Politikon Network 2016). According to a survey from October 2020 (Prelec and Marović 2021), 43 % of Montenegrins believe that the pressure on voters, such as promises or threats linked to politicized hiring, was an issue in their country. Election years are commonly accompanied by an increase in employment. Yet, pre-election employment campaigns usually only result in short-term contracts and are thus not a sustainable strategy to tackle Montenegro’s critical unemployment problem (MANS 2016b). Wages in the public sector are also frequently raised in election years (MANS 2016a). The DPS’ exploitation of the public administration is the main reason why the public administration reform (PAR), which envisages internal reorganization and a reduction of employees, has stalled (Muk, Muk, and Sošić 2020).

Concrete proof of vote buying is generally difficult to come by. Yet, there is some evidence of slush funds and unregistered donations that have been linked to vote buying. In 2015, DAN reported on a “black fund” which had been created by the municipality of Danilovgrad before the 2016 general elections. According to the article, the municipality had taken out loans totalling 2.5 million euros, allegedly to pay off “the debts of the Public Crafts Company (Javno komunalno zanatsko preduzeće) Danilovgrad” as well as for “the continuation of urban rehabilitation projects” (DAN 2015). However, the Crafts Company Danilovgrad had been suspended for years and the estimated costs for said urban rehabilitation projects were almost double those laid down in the original infrastructure plan. Another example of vote buying is the above-mentioned “envelope affair” revealing that the DPS used unregistered “campaign donations” by friendly businesspeople to lure voters to the ballot box. A study conducted after the 2018 local elections estimated that 24 % of voters were offered money in exchange for their ballot (Batrićević and Komar 2020).

There is also a noticeable increase in expenditures for social benefits, in particular one-time assistance payments, in election years. For instance, the budget of the compensation fund for laid-off workers, established in 2009, increased from 2.3 to 3.3 million euros ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2016 (MANS 2016d). The budget for subsidizing electricity bills for socially disadvantaged groups also doubled in the same period (MANS 2016c). The unclear criteria and unregulated procedures
for the allocation of social benefits and one-time assistance were confirmed by the minister of labour and social welfare Boris Marić in the “Government of the Electoral Trust” in his statement on the situation he found in the ministry (Radulović 2016). In some cases, criminal proceedings have been initiated against officials for non-transparent distribution of social welfare benefits. Examples of such cases include the 2012 allegations of abuse of office against the director of the Centre for Social Work in Pljevlja, a municipality in the north of Montenegro which resulted in a suspended prison sentence (Shukla 2014). Ahead of the 2020 elections, the DPS-led government adopted amendments to the Law on Political Parties and Election Campaigns providing for one-time social benefits in election years, to allegedly compensate for the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Immediately before the elections, the government paid out 1.8 million euros in one-time social assistance ostensibly to support citizens affected by the pandemic (Vučinić 2020). According to the above-mentioned survey from 2018, a total of 19% of respondents felt that the DPS used social benefits as a way to gain votes (Prelec and Marović 2021).

Three decades in government have rendered the DPS the main gatekeeper of economic and social resources. While clientelism has been a key mechanism for gaining support, it comes with a trade-off, as citizens have to choose between short-term benefits and abstract long-term goals. Systemic corruption has seriously compromised Montenegro’s progress in EU accession talks, as repeatedly stated in the EU Commission’s reports, and thereby undermined the DPS’ credibility when it comes to delivering EU membership. High-profile corruption scandals, such as the “audio recording affair” and the “envelope affair”, in particular, have fuelled existing discontent with the government, improving the position of new parties focused on anticorruption platforms.

Why Did the DPS Lose the Elections in 2020?

The DPS’ narrow electoral defeat by just one mandate in August 2020 represents a break in Montenegro’s political history. Yet, the DPS’ majority had already been on a downward trend for over a decade. Several factors influenced this development. As we argue, over time, some of the strategies that had sustained the DPS’ predominance eventually undermined it.

Since 2001, the DPS has strategically reinforced the cleavage between Montenegrins and Serbs. In doing so, the party had occupied the position of builder of the Montenegrin state and identity, gaining the support of pro-Montenegrin parties and the Montenegrin electorate. While, for a long time, this strategy successfully prevented cross-cutting alliances against the DPS, it also made the DPS inflexible when it came to accessing new coalition partners and developing programmatically. Once
the DPS began to pursue Montenegrin state sovereignty, it forfeited its capacity to form a coalition with pro-unionist, and later pro-Serbian parties. For example, in 2001 the People’s Party (*Narodna Stranka*, NS) dissolved the coalition with the DPS due to the latter forging ahead with independence, even after Milošević’s fall from power in 2000. While the DPS could initially offset this loss with pro-Montenegrin and minority parties, its comfortable majority began to decline in the early 2010s. This was partly a result of the end of the “honeymoon period” between the DPS and the independent media and civil society organizations, which after 2006 went back to being critics of the regime, some even establishing political parties, because the main goal of independence had been achieved. In 2013, in what may be construed as an attempt to broaden its coalition, the DPS entered into talks with pro-Serbian opposition parties about potentially forming a cross-cutting government coalition (Portal Analitika 2013). After the failure of these negotiations, however, the relationship between the DPS and the Serbian parties became evermore antagonistic, further exacerbated by the deployment of the police force against anti-NATO protests in 2015 (Al Jazeera Balkans 2015) and the indictment of two of the DF party leaders for the alleged coup attempt in 2016. When, also in 2016, the DPS and the SDP ended their long-term coalition, the DPS’ already thin majority diminished even further.

Moreover, in the past decade, the DPS has come under increased public scrutiny for its entanglement in corruption scandals, vote buying, and illegal privatization. The absence of investigation into these issues and lack of accountability on the part of senior party officials has damaged the party’s reputation and increased anti-DPS sentiment among the electorate. These incidents gave rise to new protest movements, such as *Odupri se!*, and parties focusing on anticorruption in their public appearances and party programme, like *Positive Montenegro* and the *United Reform Action* (URA), which successfully galvanized citizens’ discontent across national lines while maintaining their anti-DPS position. Montenegro’s stalled EU accession and the increasingly outspoken criticism by EU and US officials of the DPS’ involvement in corruption further fuelled criticism of the party at home.

Finally, the DPS’ defeat was a matter of chance. The wave of protests sparked by the Law on Freedom of Religion adopted in late 2019 caught the DPS, and most probably the SOC as well, by surprise. The weekly marches attracted a huge number of protestors, who not only supported the cause of the Orthodox Church, but had also found an outlet for their general discontent with the DPS. A crucial factor in this development was that these protests were not affiliated with any political party or partisan agenda. During the subsequent elections, the Church strongly supported the DF-led list and was very active in the campaign itself (Kračković 2020). The Serbian media, controlled by the Serbian government, also heavily influenced the campaign (Koprivica and Gvozdenović 2020). All this occurred against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit Montenegro’s tourist-oriented economy particularly
hard, exposing the DPS’ failure to invest in more sustainable and crisis-resistant sectors. It was in this climate that the three main opposition lists, each representing a distinct electorate, struck a tactical agreement not to attack each other but to close ranks against the DPS.

**Conclusion**

The DPS has used a variety of tools to retain power throughout its 30 years in government. Overall, it has shifted from more coercive mechanisms during the 1990s to more subtle approaches since 1997. Its ability to adjust to changing circumstances has been key to its longevity. While it has strongly relied on state resources to co-opt and repress potential competitors and control the electorate, its combination of programmatic flexibility and promotion of a Montenegrin national identity, which has polarized the electorate, has underpinned its predominance. As we have shown, some elements of the DPS’ toolkit have undermined its power over time. Corruption and repression have left citizens, political parties, civil society actors, and the international community disenchanted or even antagonized. By reinforcing the cleavage between Montenegrins and Serbs the party has ultimately limited its programmatic development and coalition potential. In the end, the contested Law on Freedom of Religion ultimately provided an opportunity for the divided opposition to unite and defeat the DPS by a slim majority in August 2020.

The DPS did not, however, vanish from the political scene after losing its majority in August 2020. Firstly, the alliances between parties that stood against the DPS are extremely fragile. Between August 2020 and April 2023, two governments were ousted by no-confidence votes. Nonetheless, the DPS was also defeated in subsequent elections, including the presidential elections in April 2023 with Milo Đukanović losing to Jakov Milatović from the Europe Now Movement (Pokret Evropa Sada!). This defeat and the subsequent resignation of Đukanović from the helm of the DPS marks the end of the Đukanović era that lasted three decades. Despite this double defeat in the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2020 and 2023, the DPS remained coherent and the largest individual political party during that period.

Finally, as we have illustrated, the DPS’ predominance is not solely a matter of parliamentary seats and government offices. The party continues to dominate the judiciary, independent oversight bodies, and the economy. No other party in Montenegro is as deeply institutionalized as the DPS. Three decades in power have entrenched the DPS in Montenegro’s society and institutions, fostering expectations and dependence on partisan favouritism, which successor governments need to take into account one way or another. Through the party’s entrenchment in state institutions, it also established a precedent for the control political parties can exert
over the state, and this is likely to outlast the ability of the DPS to control institutions. “Partocracy”, the strong control ruling parties exert over state institutions, much to the detriment of the rule of law and democracy, might be one of the most enduring legacies of the long rule of the DPS.

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