

CEGAS

Politics in the Classroom

Political influence and corruption in Montenegro's education system

CEGAS | 2026

INTRODUCTION

The way an education system functions has a profound impact on how citizens perceive fairness in society. Education is not merely a mechanism for transmitting knowledge — it is a space in which fundamental expectations are formed about whether society rewards effort and merit, or privilege and informal connections. The integrity of the education system therefore carries broad societal implications: it shapes public trust in institutions and in the principles underpinning the social contract.

This policy brief is the third in CEGAS's series of research publications on the integrity of Montenegro's education system. While the first two briefs in the series examined perceptions of unfairness and informal influences — including gifts, unequal treatment, and opaque grading — this document introduces a more direct and structural dimension: political logic as a systemic mechanism.

The focus is on how party loyalty and changes in government shape staffing policy, the atmosphere in schools, and public confidence in educational institutions. The findings draw on three complementary sources: a survey of 29 respondents, a focus group with graduating students at a Podgorica secondary school, and an analysis of the legislative framework.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1 Objectives and Research Framework

The aim of this research was to identify the perceptions and experiences of citizens regarding political influence and corruption in Montenegro's education system, with a particular focus on secondary schools and their governance. Unlike formal administrative data — which typically captures only reported cases of irregularities — perception-based research provides broader insight into how citizens experience the daily functioning of institutions.

The study was designed as a descriptive perception survey. This approach rests on the premise that citizens' perceptions of how institutions function carry independent analytical value: they shape the behaviour of actors within the system, influence students' motivation, and determine the level of trust in educational institutions — irrespective of whether they correspond to formally documented irregularities.

1.2 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using three complementary methods. An anonymous digital questionnaire was distributed in March 2026, yielding 29 valid responses. The questionnaire contained eight questions covering the perceived level of political influence, the mechanisms through which it operates, respondents' personal experiences, the effect of changes in government, and the degree of professional freedom of speech. A focus group was conducted as a structured group discussion with Year 12 students at Slobodan Škerović Grammar School in Podgorica, with anonymity guaranteed for all participants. The third method was an analysis of the relevant legislative framework, including amendments to the Law on Pre-University Education that changed the process for appointing school principals.

1.3 Sample Profile

The survey respondents were drawn from a range of professional backgrounds with direct or indirect contact with the education system, including teachers, parents, academics, and civil society activists. The focus group comprised Year 12 students with four years' experience in the system, giving them the vantage point to observe its patterns over time.

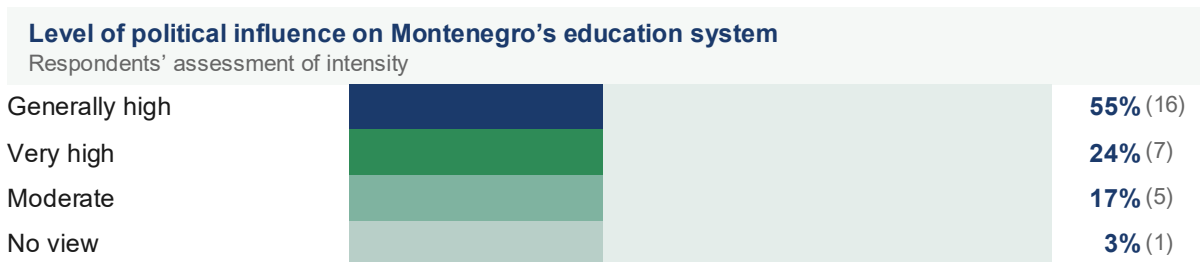
1.4 Limitations

A sample of 29 respondents is not statistically representative at the national level, and findings should be treated as indicative and exploratory. Convenience sampling carries the risk of self-selection — participants are likely to hold more clearly formed views on the subject. This research measures perceptions, not objective reality; however, perceptions carry real behavioural consequences regardless of their factual basis.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

2.1 The Level of Political Influence: A Dominant Perception of Crisis

One of the central questions in the survey concerned respondents' perception of the level of political influence on the education system. The results paint a clear and striking picture — nearly four in five respondents rate political influence as “generally high” or “very high”.



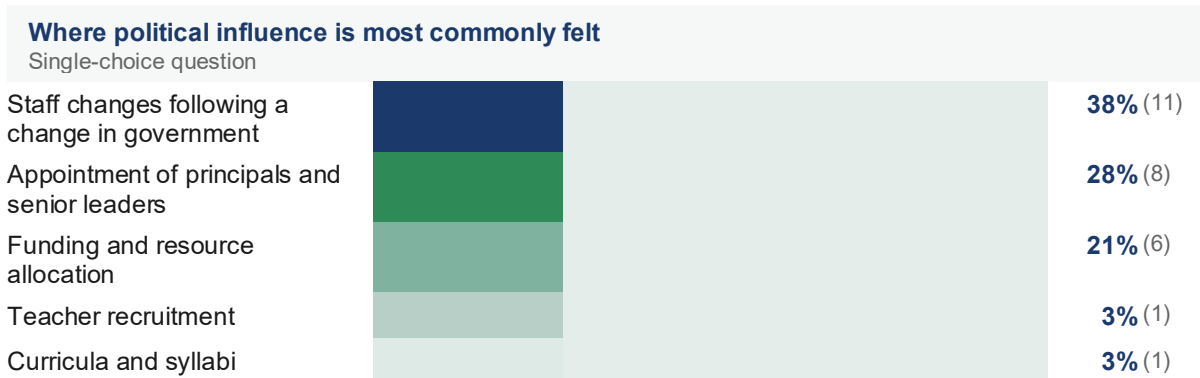
▲ Not a single respondent selected 'very low' or 'low' — the dominant consensus of the survey.

Figure 1: How would you rate the level of political influence on Montenegro's education system?

Combined, 79% of respondents rate political influence on the education system as generally high or very high. This is not a minority view — it is the dominant pattern shared by the overwhelming majority of those surveyed.

2.2 Where Political Influence Is Felt Most Strongly

Respondents identified multiple entry points for political interference in the system. Combined, the options relating to staffing policy account for 69% of all responses, making it clear that personnel — not curriculum — is the central battleground for the politicisation of education.



▲ Staffing-related options (staff changes + principal appointments + recruitment) account for 69% of all responses.

Figure 2: Where does political influence most commonly manifest itself?

“Every party in power has its own quota of school principals and institutional heads.”
— Survey respondent, March 2026

2.3 Personal Experience of Politically Motivated Appointments

Beyond perceptions, the survey asked respondents whether they or someone in their immediate circle had personally experienced politically motivated hiring or promotion in the education sector. The results show that nearly four in five respondents have had direct or indirect experience of this phenomenon.

Experience of politically motivated hiring in education

Heard of such cases		45% (13)
Someone close to me experienced it		21% (6)
Yes, personal experience		14% (4)
No such experience		21% (6)

▲ Combined, 79% of respondents have direct or indirect experience of politically motivated hiring or promotion in the education system.

Figure 3: Have you or anyone in your immediate circle experienced political affiliation being a factor in hiring or promotion in education?

“They appointed a politically connected principal — an incompetent teacher — and then promoted him to head of a directorate. The man has not a single relevant qualification.” — Respondent, personal experience

“Someone close to me was pushed out of their job for being politically unsuitable.” — Respondent, experience of a close person

2.4 The Effect of Changes in Government: Instability as the Norm

The question about how changes in government affect educational institutions revealed a striking level of consistency: only 10% of respondents believe that a change of government has minimal or no impact. The remaining 90% recognise change — differing only in its perceived scale.

How does a change in government affect educational institutions?

Significant staff turnover		48% (14)
Partial changes		41% (12)
Minimal changes		7% (2)
No impact		3% (1)

▲ 90% of respondents believe a change in government brings staffing changes — differing only in scale.

Figure 4: In your view, how does a change in government affect educational institutions?

2.5 Freedom of Professional Speech: A Culture of Fear

In addition to hiring practices, the survey examined the degree of freedom that education professionals feel to speak out publicly when their views diverge from those of the ruling government. This is a dimension that rarely appears in formal data, yet it carries far-reaching consequences for institutional culture and for what teachers can model to students.

Freedom of speech among education professionals

Respondents' assessment

Limited freedom		41% (12)
Generally have freedom		31% (9)
No freedom whatsoever		24% (7)
Don't know		3% (1)

▲ 65% of respondents believe education staff either have no freedom of speech or face significant restrictions — a critical deficit of institutional integrity.

Figure 5: How much freedom do education professionals have to publicly express views that diverge from the policies of the current government?

When teachers fear voicing a professional opinion, they cannot model the critical thinking they are expected to impart. Over time, this dynamic does not remain merely a perception — it reshapes behaviour and embeds a culture of fear that passes from staff to students.

2.6 The Legal Framework and Its Key Gaps

An analysis of the legislative framework governing the management of educational institutions in Montenegro reveals several systemic gaps that create structural conditions for politicisation and corruption. These are legislative arrangements that are, formally speaking, lawful — but which in practice open space for discretionary decision-making without accountability.

2.6.1 The Law on Pre-University Education: From Boards to Ministers

The most significant change directly relevant to the findings of this research concerns amendments to the Law on Pre-University Education in the area of school principal appointments. Montenegro has passed through three distinct models:

Under the first model, in place until the early 2000s, principals were appointed by the Ministry without any formal competitive process. The second model, introduced through reforms and in place until recently, established school boards — composed of parent, teacher, and community representatives — as the bodies responsible for selecting principals. The third, currently applicable, model returns the discretionary power of appointment directly to the Minister of Education.

The paradox: a legislative change intended to modernise the system and reduce the influence of informal networks has, in practice, concentrated the power of appointment in the hands of a single political actor, without clear merit-based criteria, defined term limits, or a performance-based removal mechanism.

Focus group participants — without any legal guidance — identified this paradox precisely and spontaneously articulated the problem of unchecked ministerial discretion: “The minister quite literally has discretionary power to choose whoever he likes.” This perception is entirely consistent with the legal reality.

2.6.2 The Absence of Merit-Based Criteria for Leadership Roles

The current legal framework does not set out sufficiently precise or binding competency criteria for the appointment of school principals. The law specifies formal eligibility conditions — educational qualifications, years of teaching experience — but does not require:

A mandatory assessment of managerial competencies; a publicly reasoned decision grounded in specific criteria; periodic performance evaluations of serving principals against pre-defined

measurable indicators; or a mechanism for removing a principal on the basis of evaluation outcomes, independent of political intervention.

This means that, under the current legal framework, competence and incompetence carry identical legal consequences — neither, in itself, determines whether a principal's mandate continues or ends. The only variable that practically governs both appointment and tenure is the minister's political will.

2.6.3 The Absence of Effective Whistleblower Protection in Education

Montenegro has enacted a Law on the Protection of Whistleblowers that applies broadly across the public sector. However, implementation in the education sector is inadequate. There is no dedicated, visibly promoted channel for reporting irregularities specifically within education, and no independent body — an education ombudsperson — to which teachers, students, or parents can turn with confidence in anonymity and procedural effectiveness.

This gap directly explains one of the most striking findings of the survey: 65% of respondents believe that education professionals lack freedom of speech entirely, or that their freedom is significantly constrained. Fear of professional retaliation is not irrational — it reflects the real absence of legal protection.

2.6.4 No Mandatory Verification of Qualification Integrity

The current legal framework does not provide for systematic, cross-referenced verification of the authenticity of diplomas and qualifications for candidates seeking positions in the education sector — particularly in leadership roles. Verification relies in practice on reporting of forged documents, rather than proactive checking. Survey respondents explicitly cited “the hiring of people with purchased degrees under political protection” as a concrete experience — suggesting that this legislative gap is not a theoretical risk but an operational reality.

2.6.5 Assessment Transparency: A Formal Obligation, a Practical Void

The Law on Pre-University Education requires schools to apply prescribed assessment criteria, but does not require:

The public disclosure of operationalised assessment criteria by subject and year group, in a format accessible to parents and students; regular inspectorate verification of the consistent application of those criteria — inspections focus on procedural rather than pedagogical compliance; or standardised assessment instruments that would reduce the scope for subjective grading.

This gap directly corresponds to a finding documented in earlier briefs in this series: seven in ten respondents believe that grading rules are not applied equally to all students. The perception is not unfounded — the law itself provides insufficient mechanisms to prevent it.

The common thread running through all identified legislative gaps: the system provides formal rules but not the mechanisms to ensure those rules are actually applied. The space between ‘a law exists’ and ‘the law works’ is precisely the institutional void that political and informal influences fill.

2.7 Focus Group Findings

The focus group conducted with Year 12 students at Slobodan Škerović Grammar School in Podgorica served as the second qualitative pillar of this research. Participants were students completing their four-year secondary education, and were therefore well positioned to reflect on

patterns observed across the full duration of their schooling. The discussion was structured around five thematic areas; all quotations have been anonymised.

2.7.1 The School as a (Conditionally) Politics-Free Zone

When asked whether they considered their school to be free from political influence, responses were generally mildly positive — but with clear reservations. Most participants said that under the current period, particularly since the arrival of a new principal, they do not perceive direct political influence on the school’s day-to-day operations. However, they were clear that political influence had been more visible in an earlier period, under the previous leadership.

The key conclusion that runs through the entire discussion is that the person at the helm of the school — who the principal is — fundamentally determines whether the institution will be shielded from external influence. The change of principal was cited as the decisive factor in transforming the school’s atmosphere. This is simultaneously encouraging (the system can work) and alarming (we are relying on an individual’s integrity rather than systemic safeguards).

“In our school, at least so far, we haven’t really felt any political influence — maybe under the previous management, yes, but right now, over this past year or so since the new leadership came, I don’t think we have.” — Focus group participant

“I think it’s present not just in the education system, but across every system — politics, government, all of it. In our school, we haven’t felt it that much.” — Focus group participant

2.7.2 Effort and Merit versus Connections and Patronage

When asked whether the school rewards effort and knowledge or connections and patronage, the majority of participants expressed the view that merit still prevails — at least in their direct experience. They stressed that in their school, unlike broader social trends, educational outcomes broadly reflect actual achievement. Several participants did note exceptions, and acknowledged that parental pressure on teachers and management is visible in certain cases.

2.7.3 Principal Appointments: The Legal Framework and Students’ Perceptions

Participants were presented with the change in the legal framework — replacing the earlier system in which school boards composed of parent and teacher representatives elected the principal with the current model in which the Minister of Education makes the appointment directly. Views were broadly critical of the direct appointment model.

Participants felt the previous model — notwithstanding its flaws — was fairer because it involved people who are present in the school community on a daily basis. They were also aware that the previous system was not ideal, since school boards had in practice been coordinated by the Ministry. One point they were emphatic about: no prior model had ever included student representatives.

“It feels like it used to be fairer — the principal selection had a process... now the Minister just decides. The Ministry — a handful of people who can pick whoever comes to mind.” — Focus group participant

“In the end, the solution we have now means the minister literally has discretionary power to choose.” — Focus group participant

Participants were unanimous that a principal’s political affiliation can directly affect how students and teachers are treated. In their experience, students whose parents hold a particular political allegiance may enjoy preferential treatment — particularly in the formation of examination panels, which directly determines the results of individual classes.

2.7.4 Teacher Recruitment: The Simulation of Quality

When asked whether they had ever suspected that a teacher had been hired on the basis of political connections rather than professional credentials, participants responded in the affirmative and offered concrete examples. Notably, they described a specific teacher whose competence they considered questionable and whom they believed had been engaged through political channels.

Particularly striking was their description of a ‘quality simulation’ mechanism: a teacher who does not ordinarily deliver adequate lessons prepares for days in advance whenever an inspection is scheduled, while students bear the everyday consequences. Participants described a specific inspection in which everyone knew exactly who the teacher was and what the situation was — yet he was given ten days to prepare and then assessed ‘according to expectations’.

“The committee that was supposed to evaluate something everyone already knows — knowing what the real situation was — gave him ten days to prepare. Then assessed him accordingly.” — Focus group participant

Participants drew a clear distinction between a teacher’s right to be politically active outside working hours and the unacceptable introduction of political proselytising into the classroom. Politically active teachers were consistently perceived as less authoritative — participants were unanimous that they respect and value teachers who are wholly dedicated to their subject.

“I have far more respect for a teacher who values knowledge and shows what they know, without bringing in outside influences like politics. Much more respect — by a long way.” — Focus group participant

2.7.5 Grading and the Gap with International Assessments

In the section of the discussion devoted to educational quality and grading, participants examined the phenomenon of grade inflation. The prevailing view was that this is considerably more pronounced in primary schools than in the grammar school, and that at secondary level there is greater pressure to achieve genuine results. Participants did, however, cite specific instances where grades had been rounded up at the end of a term — particularly when a student was close to achieving an ‘excellent’ average or was at risk of failing.

Parents were identified as one of the primary drivers of pressure on teachers — the main actors behind grade inflation, rather than political parties directly. This is an important distinction: corruption in grading takes multiple forms, and political pressure is not always its direct driver.

The moderator highlighted a statistical paradox: if the overall literacy level in Montenegro were equal to that achieved by students at this Podgorica grammar school, the country

would rank among the top ten in Europe on PISA assessments. This points to deep structural inequalities within the system — some schools function to European standards while the overall national picture is dramatically different.

Participants proposed several measures to make grading more objective: introducing more frequent knowledge assessments — fortnightly rather than once or twice per term — increasing the share of written assessments relative to oral examinations, and preserving unified national grading standards to prevent excessive disparities between schools.

2.7.6 Triangulation: What the Focus Group Adds to the Survey Findings

Setting the focus group results alongside the survey findings reveals something more than the sum of the individual findings — it reveals the logic of the system. Three key intersections stand out:

ONE SCHOOL'S POSITIVE EXPERIENCE DOES NOT EQUAL SYSTEMIC CHANGE: Students at the grammar school describe an improvement that results from a change of principal. At the same time, the survey shows that 79% of respondents still rate political influence as high or very high. This contradiction is the key finding: improvement can be local; the problem is systemic.

PERSONNEL IS THE CENTRAL BATTLEGROUND: Both the focus group and the survey show that staffing policy, principal appointments, and post-election turnover are the three most prominent mechanisms of political influence. Programme content and funding are secondary.

THE CULTURE OF FEAR SHAPES EVERYTHING ELSE: When 65% of respondents believe teachers have no or limited freedom of speech, and students intuitively recognise that hierarchy of fear, it means that fear of retaliation is a structural feature of how the system operates — not an aberration.

2.7.7 The Future: Stay or Leave Montenegro

The discussion about emigration revealed a complex but ultimately encouraging picture. Students are demotivated by systemic problems but unwilling to abandon their role in driving change. Notably, they distinguished between 'leaving because of the system' and 'leaving in order to return better equipped'. Several participants expressed an intention to study abroad precisely in order to gain a different educational experience before returning.

Participants also criticised the inadequate information available to final-year students about domestic study options and Erasmus exchange programmes, noting that foreign universities are considerably more active in promoting their offerings than Montenegrin institutions.

"I'm personally going to study abroad precisely because you can't see a way forward here — I want to experience a different kind of education, and everyone can see that I'll come back and use what I've learned to push for change." — Focus group participant, final-year student

3. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research point to a systemic rather than sporadic problem — a trust deficit that runs through every key dimension of the educational process, from how teachers are hired to why neither citizens nor education professionals themselves make use of the mechanisms the system formally provides.

The perception of political influence is widespread and internally consistent. All three methods — the survey, the focus group, and the legislative analysis — converge on the same conclusion: personnel is the central battleground of politicisation, and institutional instability driven by changes in government has become a structural feature of the system, not an exception.

Individual appointments determine institutional integrity. It is encouraging that a change of principal can rapidly and visibly transform a school's atmosphere — as focus group participants themselves confirmed. What is alarming is that this is what we rely on, rather than legislative mechanisms that would make integrity systemic and independent of any one individual.

Between experience and reporting, there is a wall. Four in five respondents have had direct or indirect experience of politically motivated hiring, yet that experience almost never results in a formal report. The reasons are consistent with those documented in earlier briefs in this series: respondents do not believe reporting would make a difference, and they do not know who to approach.

Freedom of professional speech is a critical vulnerability. When 65% of respondents believe education professionals have no freedom of speech or are significantly constrained, it means that those who should embody professional integrity are themselves trapped in a network of fear of professional retaliation.

The education system is losing its role as a mechanism of social mobility. When citizens perceive that success does not depend solely on knowledge and effort, the system ceases to function as a space of equal opportunity. Systems do not change through sudden reversals — they change through the gradual erosion of norms. It is precisely that erosion that this research documents.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the research findings, six recommendations can be identified that would contribute to the depoliticisation and strengthening of integrity in Montenegro's education system.

1 Depoliticise the appointment of school principals

- Replace ministerial discretionary appointment with an independent commission model, with mandatory participation of the teachers' council and parent representatives.
- Introduce a transparent competitive process with publicly available criteria and a mandatory written justification for every appointment decision.
- Consider non-binding consultation with students on principal candidates — those who live within the system hold a legitimate stake in who leads it.
- Introduce mandatory periodic performance evaluations of principals by the school community, with defined consequences for outcomes.

2 Establish a functional reporting channel for irregularities

- Create a dedicated, anonymous reporting channel specifically for the education sector, with a clear procedure, defined response timelines, and mandatory feedback to the reporting party.
- Establish an independent Education Ombudsperson as the primary institution to which teachers, students, and parents can turn.
- Ensure the channel is visibly and actively promoted — the majority of citizens currently do not know who to contact.

3 Introduce whistleblower protection and freedom of professional speech

- Enact or strengthen legal provisions specifically protecting whistleblowers in the education sector.
- Prohibit and sanction professional retaliation against individuals who report irregularities.
- Launch campaigns to shift the culture of silence and normalise the reporting of corruption among education professionals.

4 Reform the hiring system and qualification verification

- Introduce mandatory cross-referenced verification of the authenticity of diplomas for all candidates seeking leadership positions in education.
- Provide for criminal liability for the falsification of competition conditions or hiring in breach of legal requirements.
- Conduct a review of existing appointments in the leadership structures of educational institutions.

5 Objectify grading and reduce parental pressure

- Introduce more frequent, standardised written assessments — fortnightly — to reduce the scope for subjectivity and end-of-term grade manipulation.
- Require schools to publish clear, operationalised grading criteria by subject and year group, in a format accessible to parents and students.
- Include the consistent application of grading criteria as a standard component of regular inspectorate visits.

6 Formalise student participation and institute periodic perception research

- Include student representatives with voting rights in school boards and leadership evaluation processes.
- Introduce a systematic mechanism for periodic anonymous student evaluation of teachers' work.
- Adopt an annual or biennial standardised perception survey as an early-warning instrument for the Ministry of Education.

- Ensure that integrity reforms are tracked against measurable indicators — not procedural steps alone.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The questionnaire was distributed in March 2026 through CEGAS's digital channels and partner organisations. Twenty-nine valid responses were received. The sampling is non-probability and convenience-based — results are indicative, not representative of the general population. The focus group was conducted with the written consent of participants; all quotations have been anonymised. This policy brief is the third in CEGAS's series on the integrity of Montenegro's education system. The first two briefs are available at www.cegas.me.