



Weekly Briefing

Montenegro external relations briefing:

External relations Summary

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Summary

During the previous years, no progress was made in the direction of EU integration. This year, as in the previous one, Montenegro recorded limited progress. Therefore, there is a need for a more proactive approach in the implementation of reforms and the need to achieve results. Many reports from the EU indicate the need for more decisive implementation of reforms. Stagnation in EU integration is largely due to political instability and lack of political dialogue, frequent changes of government. After the parliamentary elections, Montenegro got a new government, which announced that it will continue to lead the policy of EU integration. On the other hand, the EU shows significant interest in the integration of the Western Balkan countries. Therefore, the New Integration Plan was adopted and financial assistance was defined within the framework of the New Growth Plan for the countries of the Western Balkans in order to speed up the integration process. An important issue related to Montenegrin external relations is security policy. Due to the increased risk of instability, the focus of NATO policy on the Western Balkans region has increased in order to preserve stability and peace. During this year, Montenegro pursued a policy that is in line with NATO policy and in the direction of achieving the goals of NATO policy. Also, Montenegro participated in initiatives and events aimed at improving regional cooperation.

Introduction

Montenegrin foreign policy refers to EU integration and security policy that is harmonized with NATO policy. Many events were organized in which Montenegro participated, and which were dedicated to accelerating the integration process and ensuring security and stability in the countries of the region.

Continuation of stagnation in EU integration

The continuation of stagnation in the implementation of the EU integration process was recorded in 2023. After the negative evaluations of the European Commission in 2022, where

it was assessed, that limited progress had been achieved, the latest Progress Report from November shows the continuation of the trend and limited progress of Montenegro in the implementation of reforms. According to the ratings from the latest report, Montenegro achieved good progress in 4 negotiation chapters, while some progress was achieved in 13 chapters. However, limited progress was achieved in 16 chapters, which is almost half of the total number of negotiation chapters. In relation to fundamentals, the cluster that opens first and closes last, some progress was achieved in only one chapter, while limited progress was achieved in all others.¹ This clearly shows the stagnation in EU integration. Other reports have also shown that Montenegro is not recording results in the process of implementing reforms. The Draft Report on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro by the European Parliament², which was published in June showed that Montenegro is committed to EU integration and harmonization of foreign and security policy with EU policy, but that there is a need for further harmonization of visa policy with the EU policy. However, the Report emphasizes that Montenegro is not recording results on the EU path, indicating that no chapter has been closed during the previous six years. Additionally, the Non-paper Report regarding Chapters 23 and 24 by the European Commission from the June 2023, showed that there are significant delays in the implementation of reforms, especially in the area of the rule of law³. The institutional crisis, especially in the judicial system, which referred to the blockade of the constitutional court until the beginning of 2023, was also emphasized.

Frequent changes of government, political tensions and disagreements between political parties, lack of political dialogue, as well as insufficient engagement of Montenegro in fulfilling the goals and obligations have influenced the stagnation of EU integration of Montenegro. During the last three years, Montenegro has changed the composition of the government three times, and during the previous year, the government functioned in a technical mandate that was voted no confidence in 2022. The new government was formed after extraordinary parliamentary elections only at the end of October. Additionally, “on several occasions, the Government and/or the Parliament chose to ignore recommendations of the European Commission and/or the Venice Commission”⁴, which shows that EU integration was on the list

¹ European Commission (2023) Montenegro 2023 Report, available on: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_694%20Montenegro%20report.pdf

² European Parliament (2023) Draft Report on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro, available on: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-749915_EN.pdf

³ CDM (2023) Non-pejper: Crna Gora izgubila fokus na ključnim EU reformama, posebno u oblasti vladavine prava, available on: <https://www.cdm.me/politika/non-pejper-crna-gora-izgubila-fokus-na-kljucnim-eu-reformama-posebno-u-oblasti-vladavine-prava/>

⁴ European Commission (2023) Montenegro 2023 Report, available on: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_694%20Montenegro%20report.pdf

of priorities only in a formal sense, but not in a substantive sense. In this case, it is of great importance to approach the process of EU integration more proactively and more dedicatedly.

The importance of EU integration of the Western Balkan countries and the need to implement reforms in order to advance the process was also emphasized at the Brdo-Brioni Process Summit held in Skopje in September. Montenegrin president participated to the Summit. The Skopje Declaration emphasized the commitment of the countries of the Western Balkans region to the intensification of the integration process. The importance of regional cooperation and a joint approach to solving open issues and challenges in new conditions and circumstances, which affect various areas such as climate change, youth emigration and others, was also emphasized. One of the important areas that need to be worked on is related to "the rule of law, prosperity, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration" was pointed out.⁵

In the coming period, it can be expected that Montenegro will continue to implement the EU integration policy. The new government has announced that it will be dedicated to the fulfillment of goals and the implementation of reform processes. This attitude was emphasized at the meeting of ministers of foreign affairs held in November in Chisinau in Moldova within the framework of the Central European Initiative (CEI)⁶. At this meeting, EU integration was discussed, as well as the role of this initiative in the entire process of integration⁷. U Joint Statement, which was adopted on the meeting, countries expressed their joint condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine and pointed out that EU integration is a very important process that leads to the preservation of peace and stability in this region. Also, member countries of the initiative agreed on the implementation of activities aimed at implementing the SDGs, as well as improving cooperation between CEI member countries, which will have positive effects on the development of the entire region, increasing well-being, quality life and environment⁸.

⁵ President of the North Macedonia (2023) Declaration from the Meeting of the leaders of the Brdo – Brijuni Process participating countries, press release, available on: https://pretsedatel.mk/en/deklaracija_bbp_skopje-2/

⁶ Government of Montenegro (2023) Minister Ivanovic in Chisinau: Regional cooperation driving reforms and development, available on: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/ministar-ivanovic-u-kisinjevu-regionalna-saradnja-pokretac-reformi-i-razvoja>

⁷ Central European Initiative (2023) MFA meeting in Chisinau sets course for a more fruitful regional cooperation towards EU integration, available on: <https://www.cei.int/news/9761/cei-mfa-meeting-in-chisinau-sets-course-for-a-more-fruitful-regional-cooperation-towards-eu>

⁸ Central European Initiative (2023) Joint Statement, available on: <https://www.cei.int/sites/default/files/2023-11/CEI%20Joint%20Statement%2022.11.23%20final.pdf>

The new geopolitical situation imposed the need for greater engagement of the countries of the Western Balkans towards joining the EU. On the other hand, it can be seen that the EU is more committed to the integration of these countries into the EU community. Joining Montenegro and other countries to the EU would ensure safety and security in the entire region. Public opinion research shows that 37.1% of citizens believe that Russian influence is dangerous for the region, while a slightly smaller percentage (35.6%) of respondents gave the opposite answer.⁹ Taking into account the presence of Russian influence in the countries of the Western Balkans and the war in Ukraine, the EU has shown greater orientation towards this region and that it has a more proactive approach to the implementation of the enlargement policy.

In this connection, a New Plan for all the countries of the Western Balkan region was prepared in order to speed up the integration process. The Plan was presented at this year's GLOBSEC conference, which was organized in Bratislava in May. The new plan consists of 4 measures consisting of the following: (i) bringing the region closer to the EU single market; (ii) deepening regional economic integration, (iii) accelerating fundamental reforms and (iv) boosting pre-accession funds¹⁰. In this way, strengthening regional cooperation and economic connectivity, increasing the attractiveness of the region for foreign investors, rapid economic growth of the region, and therefore convergence of the Western Balkan countries to the EU would be achieved.¹¹ The adoption of the New Integration Plan of the Western Balkan countries shows the EU's interest in this region, which was not the case to a large extent during the previous years.

Taking into account the previously implemented activities and strategies, and with the aim of faster integration of the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU, in November European Commission presented a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Plan contains different proposals for improving and strengthening the integration process and greater alignment with EU standards and policies. Therefore, the focus of the New Growth Plan also aims to achieve greater economic growth in Western Balkan region and accelerate economic convergence with the EU countries. In order to fulfill the goal, the European Commission will allocate EUR 6 billion for projects in the region in the period from 2024 to 2027 (EUR 2 billion

⁹ Centre for Civil Education (2023) Plenum o crnogorsko-srpskim odnosima, available on: <https://media.cce.org/2023/10/CGO-ADD-Damar-CH-Plenum-CG-SRB.pdf>

¹⁰ GLOBSEC 2023 (2023) GLOBSEC 2023, Day 3 highlights, available on: <https://forum2023.globsec.org/globsec-2023-day-3-highlights/>

¹¹ GLOBSEC2023 (2023) Speech by the President at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum, available on: <https://forum2023.globsec.org/speech-by-the-president-at-the-globsec-2023-bratislava-forum/>

refers to grants, while EUR 4 billion is concessional loans). There are four defined pillars, which are related to the different segments of the development. The first pillar is related to enhancing economic integration with the European Union's single market, which includes actions related to (i) Free movement of goods, (ii) Free movement of services and workers; (iii) Access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA); (iv) Facilitation of Road transport; (v) Integration and decarbonisation of Energy markets; (vi) Digital Single Market and (vii) Integration into industrial supply chains¹². The second pillar refers to boosting economic integration within the Western Balkans countries, while the third pillar refers to accelerating fundamental reforms. The financial assistance to support the reforms through a Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans is contained in the fourth pillar. Obtaining funds depends on fulfilling specific socio-economic and fundamental reforms by Montenegro and other countries and Montenegro prepares a Reform Agenda¹³. At the end of October, on the occasion of the adoption and presentation of the New Growth Plan, the President of the European Commission visited the countries of the Western Balkans, including Montenegro. At the meeting with the President of Montenegro, the President of the European Commission emphasized that Montenegro should be fully committed to EU integrations and should focus more on fulfilling the tasks arising from the integration process¹⁴.

Adoption of the New Integration Plan and the New Growth Plan, the Western Balkan countries are in the focus of the EU enlargement policy. Therefore, it is of great importance that Montenegro takes advantage of the opportunities, considering that significant infrastructure and other projects that will contribute to economic growth and contribute to the integration process can be financed through financial support.

The discussion on Enlargement policy at the level of EU members was also represented during the previous year. The war in Ukraine contributed to a more active discussion of this policy, so that the EU turned more towards Ukraine and Moldova. Therefore, a discussion was started on the easier inclusion of individual countries in the EU, where there were different opinions. The President of France presented a proposal on multi-speed Europe, in relation to the EU enlargement. In that way, a different approach considering the new circumstances would be applied. Which means, on the one hand, speeding up the integration process for countries

¹² European Commission (2023) New growth plan for the Western Balkans, available on: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Radio slobodna evropa (2023), Fon der Lajen: Crna Gora da pređe posljednju milju do EU, available on: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/fon-der-lajen-crna-gora/32662168.html>

"who were favourable", and slower integration process would be foreseen for other countries, on the other side.¹⁵ Slovenia and Croatia are one of the countries that expressed an opposing view of the approach¹⁶. However, this issue was not formally discussed at the level of all EU countries and did not represent an official proposal, so it is questionable how many countries would actually support a different approach for different countries. In any case, the integration process should represent the fulfilment of the defined requirements and criteria, so that there should be no concessions or limiting circumstances for one or another group of countries. Therefore, the EU accession process should be applied in the same way and with the same intensity to all candidate countries.

Security policy: important role of NATO Alliance

Another significant segment of the external relations of Montenegro refers to the security policy. The events of the last two years, above all the war in Ukraine, have affected the geopolitical situation, so the issue of security is one of the most important that was discussed in the previous period. Montenegro, as already said, is a candidate country for the EU and a member of the NATO Alliance, so it has adapted its security policy to the policy of the EU and NATO members. Montenegro clearly took a stance towards the war in Ukraine, where she condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine and, following the EU countries, imposed sanctions on Russia. During the previous period, the NATO Alliance has indicated several times that it is interested in preserving peace and stability in the Western Balkan region. This could be seen at the last NATO Summit held in July in Vilnius. It was pointed out at the Summit that the NATO Alliance remains "strongly committed to the security and stability of the Western Balkans by supporting reforms that advance the respective NATO and EU aspirations".¹⁷ An additional issue discussed at the Summit concerns defence spending. Therefore, new guidelines were adopted that provide for the allocation for defence in the amount of 2% of GDP, in order to provide stable financing with the aim of providing a safe environment and to prepare countries for new challenges in the security policy, technology development and factors of

¹⁵France Medias Monde (2023) Macron calls for 'multi-speed' Europe to cope with enlarged bloc, available on: <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20230828-macron-calls-for-multi-speed-europe-to-cope-with-enlarged-bloc>

¹⁶Radio Slobodna Evropa (2023) Predsjednici Hrvatske i Slovenije protiv „EU u različitim brzinama“, available on: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/severna-makedonija-skoplje-proces-brdo-brioni-zapadni-balkan-eu/32587143.html>

¹⁷ NATO (2023) Vilnius Summit Communiqué, available on: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm?selectedLocale=en

instability at the international level. When it comes to Montenegro, it has planned an amount of EUR 123 million for defence for 2023, which represents 2% of the estimated GDP¹⁸. The Montenegrin Minister of Defence announced that this percentage of GDP allocation for defence is planned for the next year as well. NATO pre-Vilnius Summit opinion polls from 2023 show differences in the perception of Montenegrin citizens about defence spending, where one third of respondents said that Montenegro should spend more on defence, while 41% said that the country should allocate less than the current defence spending.¹⁹ Following the decisions of the NATO Summit Alliance, Montenegro shows commitment to the fulfilment of NATO policy goals.

In November 2023, the NATO secretary visited the Western Balkans, where he had individual meetings with countries that are not members of NATO, while a joint meeting was organized in Skopje with Western Balkan countries that are members of the NATO Alliance, including Montenegro, and prime ministers of Croatia and Slovenia. At this meeting, it was emphasized that the stability and security of the Western Balkan region is one of the important goals of the NATO Alliance. On the other hand, the Montenegrin Prime Minister emphasized that Montenegro implements a policy that is in accordance with NATO policy. Also, it can be expected that Montenegro will follow the policy of NATO in the coming period as well. The Prime Minister of Montenegro stated that the new Government is oriented towards Euro-Atlantic integration and that it will lead a policy towards EU membership and the fulfilment of NATO policy goals²⁰.

The role of NATO for security and stability in Montenegro was the topic of discussion at this year's "To Be Secure Forum" (2BS Forum), which was organized by the Atlant Association of Montenegro in October. The forum gathered Montenegrins and officials from other countries, representatives of international organizations, academies, security experts, NGOs and ambassadors. The importance of the role of NATO for the security and stability of the region was emphasized at the Forum, where security policy taking into account the war in Ukraine and positions and perspectives of the Western Balkans were discussed. The US

¹⁸ Portal Analitika (2023) Od bezbjednosnog okruženja Crne Gore zavisice izdvajanja za odbranu, available on: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/od-bezbjednosnog-okruzenja-crne-gore-zavisice-izdvajanja-za-odbranu>

¹⁹ NATO (2023) NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2023, available on:

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/2300707-pre-summit-research-2023.pdf

²⁰ Government of Montenegro (2023), Spajić - Stoltenberg: Montenegro has a vital role for stability in the Western Balkans, available on: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/spajic-stoltenberg-crna-gora-ima-vitalnu-ulogu-za-stabilnost-na-zapadnom-balkanu>

ambassador pointed out that Russian influence is present in the countries of the Western Balkans, including Montenegro, which additionally represents a challenge in security policy and could represent a danger to the stability and security of the region²¹. In addition, the president of the Board of Directors of the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro, emphasized that Russian aggression against Ukraine has additionally encouraged numerous anti-democratic subjects in the Balkans, whose actions are directed against undermining peace and stability²². Montenegro showed its commitment to meeting the goals of NATO security policy through its participation in The Warsaw Security Forum, which was organized in October in Poland.²³ The Prime Minister of Montenegro expressed Montenegro's position and commitment to EU integration and the complete alignment of Montenegro's foreign policy with EU foreign policy. Also, the attitude towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine was also emphasized, indicating that Ukraine's struggle is a struggle to defend the democratic values of all democratic nations.²⁴

Regional initiatives and improvement of regional cooperation

An important segment of the external policy refers to the maintenance and improvement of regional cooperation. Montenegro has good cooperation with all neighbouring countries and there are no open and unresolved bilateral issues. Regional cooperation is of great importance, since numerous challenges and issues can be solved through a joint approach and joint effort. Also, regional initiatives play a significant role in supporting and accelerating the process of integration of the countries of the Western Balkan region into the EU. In order to contribute to the strengthening of regional cooperation, Montenegro actively participated in various initiatives. During the previous year, various events and meetings were organized with the aim of increasing regional cooperation, strengthening the security sector and increasing the resistance of countries to new security challenges, as well as events aimed at improving the EU integration process.

²¹ Embassy of United States in Montenegro (2023) Govor američke ambasadorke Džudi Rajzing Rajnke na 13. forumu To Be Secure, available on: <https://me.usembassy.gov/me/govor-americke-ambasadorke-dzudi-rajzing-rajnke-na-13-forumu-to-be-secure/>

²² To Be Secure Forum (2023) The 2BS Fourm began, available on: <https://2bs.me/the-2bs-forum-began/>

²³ Warsaw Security Forum, Who We Are, available on: <https://warsawsecurityforum.org/about/>

²⁴ Government of Montenegro (2023) Abazović na Varsavskom bezbjednosnom forumu: Iskoristiti geopolitički momentum za snažnije djelovanje NATO i EU, available on: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/abazovic-na-varsavskom-bezbjednosnom-forumu-iskoristiti-sadasnji-geopoliticki-momentum-za-snaznije-djelovanje-nato-i-eu>

In the first half of the year, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo launched the regional initiative "Western Balkan QUAD - 100 percent compliance with EU policy". The goal of this initiative is full compliance with the European Common Foreign and Security Policy. However, two countries of the region, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, are not members of this platform, although there is a possibility of their joining²⁵. As the common characteristic of the countries that formed the platform is the policy towards the war in Ukraine and the introduction of sanctions against Russia, the possible reason why Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not part of the platform is the attitude towards this kind of policy.

Montenegro also participated in the meeting of foreign ministers of member states and observers within the framework of the US - Adriatic Charter (A5), which was founded with the aim of improving and strengthening defence capacities. At this year's meeting, the participants discussed current security and political challenges, where first of all, the need to adapt the initiative to new conditions was pointed out. Therefore, regional cooperation is of great importance in order to overcome common problems and challenges. Through this and other initiatives, Montenegro has shown that it leads a policy of strengthening regional cooperation and that these platforms contribute to the stability, security, and prosperity of not only Montenegro, but also of all the countries of the region²⁶.

In order to strengthen economic and political relations between Montenegro and Serbia, the newly elected president of Montenegro was on an official visit to Serbia. Relations between the two countries had been damaged during previous years. Many disagreements between Montenegro and Serbia have marked the relationship between the two countries. Disagreements started with the passing of the Law on Freedom of Religion, which led to great opposition from the Serbian Orthodox Church and which further affected the deterioration of relations between the countries, as well as the division of society in Montenegro. Tensions also resulted in the expulsion of the Serbian ambassador from Montenegro. Nevertheless, in 2023, Serbia appointed an ambassador to Montenegro after three years, although it could have done so much earlier. So, after these and disagreements, relations were stable this year. However, the interference of Serbia in the internal affairs of Montenegro was often discussed in public. This problem was discussed by political parties and other organizations and individuals. Such

²⁵Analitika (2023) Zemlje regije formirale novi savez: U njemu nema Srbije, available on: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/zemlje-regije-formirale-novi-savez-u-njemu-nema-srbije>

²⁶ Government of Montenegro (2023) Regionalne bezbjednosne inicijative su garant dugoročne stabilnosti naših država, available on: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/regionalne-bezbjednosne-inicijative-su-garant-dugorocne-stabilnosti-nasih-drzava>

findings can be found in the Report of the European Parliament, which states that "Remains seriously concerned by malignant foreign interference, destabilization efforts, hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns by foreign actors in Montenegro; notes that religious institutions can be used as a tool for external influence and condemns Serbian interference in this regard"²⁷. The public opinion also perceives that Serbia is interfering in the internal affairs of Montenegro, showing that 52.9% of respondents believe that there is interference by Serbia in the internal political affairs of Montenegro, and 32% of respondents believe that the interference of the authorities in Serbia is the main problem in the relations between the two countries²⁸.

In the coming period, one can expect the continuation of the EU integration policy and the recording of concrete results in the field of implementing reforms. EU integration and the continued pursuit of NATO policy provide stability and security in Montenegro, but in the entire Western Balkan region. Therefore, more devoted and dedicated work on these processes is of great importance. Additionally, it is of great importance to use the possibility of financial support from the EU in order to finance important projects that will have multiplied effects on economic growth. Active participation and contribution to initiatives that promote regional cooperation and EU integration are also of great importance for Montenegro.

²⁷ European Parliament (2023) Draft Report on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro, available on: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-749915_EN.pdf

²⁸ Centre for Civil Education (2023) Plenum o crnogorsko-srpskim odnosima, available on: <https://media.cce.org/2023/10/CGO-ADD-Damar-CH-Plenum-CG-SRB.pdf>