



Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro external relations briefing:
Intensification of the EU integration process: Montenegro on the way
to obtaining IBAR
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Intensification of the EU integration process: Montenegro on the way to obtaining IBAR

Abstract

The EU integration process was in the focus of the external relation during the previous period. More intensive cooperation and communication between Montenegrin and EU officials was achieved, which was reflected in several meetings organized in Montenegro and other countries. This results in EU integration becoming one of the priority topics in the Government's policy. Progress has been made in fulfilling the criteria, so Montenegro is expected to receive the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) in the middle of the year, which would represent a significant step on the EU path and an important point in the entire process. Certainly, Montenegro should continue to implement the reform process with more commitment and determination. In relation to regional cooperation, the visit of the president of Republika Srpska caused a reaction from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is why a note of protest was sent to Montenegro. Also, the relationship with Croatia was marked by the cancellation of the meeting of the defence ministers of the two countries due to disagreements over the ownership of the ship and the memorial plaque located in Montenegro. However, it is not expected that relations with these two neighbouring countries will be damaged in the coming period.

Introduction

Montenegro continued to lead the EU integration policy and, unlike previous years, worked more intensively on the reform process. In December 2023, the Chief Negotiator of Montenegro with the EU was appointed, which can contribute to the entire process. Taking into account the entire negotiation process and the current cross-section of the situation, Montenegro has an enviable position on the EU path and can be expected to be the first next member of the EU. The discussion about EU integration and the achievement of goals during this year and the discussion about concrete results has been intensified during recent months. On the other hand, there is a positive attitude on the part of the EU, which has been shown through public speeches and visits of EU officials to Montenegro.

Montenegro was visited by the European Commissioner for Enlargement

During the previous months, EU integration occupied the most important place in external relations. Montenegro continued with the implementation of the reform process, which resulted in optimism and favourable expectations regarding positive attitudes from the EU. In addition, during the previous months, several visits and meetings were organized between Montenegrin and EU officials, both in Montenegro and in the EU. This indicates a greater orientation of the EU towards Montenegro and the accession of Montenegro to the EU. Also, it can be a signal that concrete activities are being carried out that would have results and fulfil the criteria. In February, the European Commissioner for Enlargement was on an official visit to Montenegro, where he had meetings with the highest Montenegrin officials, including the Prime Minister, the President of Montenegro, the President of the Parliament of Montenegro

In relation to the conduct of EU policy, the European Commissioner for Enlargement pointed out that the results of the Government's work can be seen in the process of implementing reforms, where the results in the area of the rule of law are highlighted. However, it was also pointed out that, despite progress, Montenegro missed many messages during the previous period. Advances in EU integration are also assessed by the Council of the EU. In the document of the Council of the EU, it is stated that "positive developments in Montenegro" are noted, and that is Montenegro with the current government "has managed to make progress in all aspects of its cooperation in the region and with the EU in a short period".¹

In this process in the coming period, Montenegro should fulfil and achieve results within the framework of chapters 23 and 24 (Judiciary and fundamental rights and Justice, freedom, and security), where it is necessary to continue work in the judiciary, adopt legal regulations in this field, achieve results in the fight against corruption and crime and others². After the visit, the European Commissioner for Enlargement pointed out that there is a willingness to close temporary benchmarks, which would be of great importance for Montenegro and its EU path.

Namely, Montenegro accepted the new Methodology for accession to the EU from 2020. Previously, the process of EU integration was conducted according to the methodology that was valid before the EU made a decision on revising the rules and criteria for EU membership. The new Methodology provides that no chapter can be closed before the interim benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24 are met, that is, before the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report -

¹ Council of the European Union (2024) RELAX 210- Current Situation in Montenegro, available on: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6708-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

² CDM (2024) Varhelji: We have seen the results, the door of the EU is wide open for Montenegro, available on: <https://www.cdm.me/politika/varhelji-vidjeli-smo-rezultate-vrata-eu-sirom-otvorena-za-crnu-goru/>

IBAR is obtained. In fact, these two chapters have temporary benchmarks, the fulfilment of which conditions the closure of other chapters in the negotiation process. Therefore, it is of great importance to work more intensively on the closure of temporary benchmarks. Of the total number of defined benchmarks, 37% were not met. That is, out of a total of 83 temporary benchmarks, 31 have not yet been met³. Unfulfilled benchmarks refer to legal regulations in the field of justice and the fight against corruption and organized crime, media law and others⁴. Obtaining IBAR would contribute to Montenegro being able to start the process of closing chapters, without restrictions, but also closing chapters for which the conditions for closing have already been met. In this way, Montenegro would receive final benchmarks from the EU, on which it would work in the following period.

It is of great importance for Montenegro to take advantage of the opportunity that is being offered and to speed up the process of EU integration by working on the reform process. Regardless of the current policy, there must be more focused work on fulfilling the criteria so that the results are more visible. For the continuation of EU integration, a dedicated and determined approach is needed. Therefore, any instability in the current Government, which was present in the previous period, is a danger for the continuation of successful processes. Considering the expectations and the reform processes so far, in the second half of the year it can be expected that Montenegro will enter the next phase of negotiations for membership in the EU, given that the fulfilment of temporary benchmarks is expected.

Prime Minister's meeting in Skopje: Growth Plan for Western Balkan region

The issue that will intensify this year is the Growth Plan that the EU adopted during 2023 in order to bring the growth of the Western Balkan countries closer to the EU countries. The implementation of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans is expected to begin this year. In November, last year, this Plan was adopted by the European Commission. The plan was adopted with the aim of contributing to the countries of the Western Balkans to achieve greater economic growth and accelerate economic convergence with the EU countries and where EUR 6 billion was allocated for this purpose (out of which EUR 2 billion refers to grants, while EUR 4 billion is concessional loans) for the implementation of projects in this region in the period until 2027. Therefore, it is expected that the Plan will contribute to making the countries of the

³ Pobjeda (2024) Zenović: Montenegro still has 31 unfulfilled criteria for obtaining IBAR, available on: <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/zenovic-crnoj-gori-ostalo-31-neispunjeno-mjerilo-za-dobijanje-ibar-a>

⁴ EU4ME (2024) What is IBAR and why is it important for Montenegro? available on: <https://www.eu.me/sta-je-ibar-i-zbog-cega-je-vazan-za-crnu-goru/>

region closer to the EU and contribute to the reform process. The Growth Plan includes four pillars, which refer to enhancing economic integration with the European Union's single market, boosting economic integration within the Western Balkans, to accelerating fundamental reforms and financial assistance to support the reforms through a Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans.⁵ The plan is an excellent tool for encouraging the integration process of all the countries of the region. In order for Montenegro, or any other country in the region, to receive financial resources, it is necessary to implement the reforms specified, that is, for the proposed project to result in a certain reform.

The discussion about the Plan and the possibilities offered through the Plan was the occasion for the gathering of officials from all the countries of the region at the meeting held in North Macedonia in January. In addition to the prime ministers of all six countries, the meeting was attended by the Director General of the European Commission's Directorate for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations and the US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia. The Prime Minister of Montenegro emphasized at the meeting that Montenegro is committed to the implementation of the Plan, which refers to "strengthening the legal framework, investing in infrastructure and encouraging the culture of entrepreneurship"⁶. In this regard, Montenegro prepared the Reform Agenda, which includes priority areas related to "business environment and private sector development, digital and green energy transition, human resources development and strengthening the rule of law".⁷

Could internal political instability be a limiting factor on the EU path?

One of the key factors determining the success of EU integration is political stability within the country. The previous few years were characterized by political disagreements, an unstable government, which led to a vote of no confidence twice, and in the end premature parliamentary elections. Internal political instability and mutual political struggle between political parties has taken the place of the EU integration process. The new government that was formed at the end of the previous year put EU integration at the top of its priorities. By participating in various events and gatherings, as well as in public appearances, government

⁵ 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

⁶ Government of Montenegro (2024) Spajić in Skopje: Six billion from the Growth Plan - an opportunity that the region must take advantage of, available on: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/spajic-u-skoplju-sest-milijardi-iz-plana-rasta-sansa-koju-region-mora-iskoristiti>

⁷ *ibid.*

representatives pointed to the orientation of external policy towards EU integration. However, the new political instability during the previous month represents a new challenge for the Montenegrin government. Namely, the political party, which is the strongest in the new government, began to disband, so that a part of the politicians resigned from the party (including the president of Montenegro, who was at odds with the prime minister in his political views). In addition, there were clashes between other parties that make up the government. The heterogeneity of the program and policy orientation of those political parties led to disagreements about different internal issues, which further called into question the current ruling coalition. Therefore, the discussion about the reconstruction of the Government has intensified. In any case, the continuation of instability can slow down the EU path of Montenegro, because every deviation from the focus of EU integration will have a negative impact on EU integration. This can especially affect the potential obtaining of IBAR, but also of the later implementation of the EU integration process.

As stated, at the end of the first half of this year, Montenegro is expected to receive IBAR. Any political turmoil and instability, or potential reconstruction of the Government would affect the positivity of the Report itself. Another danger arises from the composition of the potential new, reconstituted Government. That is, whether the newly reconstructed government would dedicate itself to the policy of EU integration or not (considering the great differences in the political programs between the coalition partners). Previous experience clearly indicates that there must be political commitment and will in leading the EU integration process.

Protest note from Bosnia and Herzegovina

In February, the President of the Republic of Srpska visited Montenegro, where he met with the President of the Parliament of Montenegro. This caused the indignation of part of the public and political parties. The complaints stem from the views of the president of Republika Srpska and the policy he leads, which consists of anti-European policies and policies that are close to Russia and that can undermine stability in Montenegro. Otherwise, the president of Republika Srpska is under United States and United Kingdom sanctions and he visited Montenegro after meeting with the Russian President in February this year.⁸

As the meeting was held in the official premises of the Parliament of Montenegro and as the symbols of Bosnia and Herzegovina were not highlighted, but only of Republika Srpska,

⁸ N1 (2024) Bosnia sends protest note to Montenegro, available on: <https://n1info.ba/english/news/bosnia-sends-protest-note-to-montenegro/>

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina sent a note of protest to the Montenegrin authorities. Otherwise, Republika Srpska is an entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, so the symbols of Bosnia and Herzegovina should be highlighted, considering that the meeting took on the elements of an official visit. However, the note of protest was also sent because of the messages sent by the President of Republika Srpska during the visit, which refer to the unification of Serbs. On the other hand, the president of the Parliament of Montenegro is the president of a political party that advocates the interests of the Serbian people. That political party is part of the government in Montenegro and is close to Serbian and Russian politics. As a result, political parties with opposing views and programs called out the President of the Parliament for organizing this meeting, and a part of the citizens organized a protest in front of the Parliament. Conducting such a policy can lead to greater divisions in society and potentially cause instability.

During the visit, the President of Republika Srpska submitted a proposal for an agreement on special relations between Republika Srpska and Montenegro, which includes improving and strengthening cooperation in various fields, such as economy, culture, education and sports. This agreement was created almost a decade and a half ago, but the then government in Montenegro refused to sign it. Considering the current structure of the government, a discussion on this agreement can be expected in the coming period.⁹

However, despite these events, it is not expected that relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina will be damaged in the coming period. Montenegro has a clear attitude towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and the previous policy was in the direction of mutual respect and with the aim of cultivating good neighbourly relations.

Relations with Croatia: will it block EU integration?

At the beginning of the year, there were disagreements and opposing views between the defence ministers of Montenegro and Croatia regarding the ownership of the ship "Jadran". This caused the Croatian defence minister to cancel the meeting that was supposed to be held with the Montenegrin minister in Montenegro.

Namely, the meeting between the two ministers was supposed to take place as part of the celebration of the Day of the Croatian People in Montenegro. However, the Minister of Defence

⁹ Radio Slobodna Evropa (2024) Andrija Mandić and protests in front of the Parliament greeted Dodika in Montenegro, available on: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-republika-srpska-dodik-mandic/32837315.html>

of Croatia expressed dissatisfaction with the views of the Minister of Defence of Montenegro regarding the memorial plaque in Morinje¹⁰ and the ownership of the sailing ship "Jadran". The Montenegrin Minister of Defence disagrees with the text on the memorial plaque as well as the way it was placed and points out that the ship "Jadran" belongs to Montenegro and that Croatia has no right to ownership, taking into account the agreement after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and that Montenegro does not want to negotiate on ownership.¹¹ As a result of such attitudes, the Croatian Defence Minister cancelled the meeting¹². The question of ownership and controversial positions surrounding the warship has existed for a long time. The ship remained in Montenegro as part of the legacy after the collapse of Yugoslavia in the nineties. However, there is a certain risk that Croatia, as an EU member, could block Montenegro on its way to the EU. Croatia has already done this in the past towards Serbia. However, taking into account the relations between the two countries so far, such a scenario is unlikely. Montenegro shows a firm commitment of its foreign policy to maintaining and improving good neighbourly relations with all countries in the region, including Croatia. This was also confirmed at the meeting of the foreign ministers of the two countries, which was held at the end of the previous year. Therefore, cooperation and solving of open issues through negotiations and dialogue can be expected, and in the coming period, the tightening of relations is not expected. In the previous period, Croatia was always an important partner and EU member state that provided support to Montenegro in the EU process. In 2020, Montenegro opened the last negotiation chapter in the period of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Montenegro at the Munich Security Conference

In mid-February, the Munich Security Conference was held in Munich. This was also the sixtieth conference, which brought together a large number of leaders from different countries. Security challenges and the geopolitical situation on the international scene, especially the war in Ukraine, are the topics of discussion at this year's forum, as well as the discussion of ways and models to improve the security situation. One part of the discussion also referred to the security situation in the Western Balkan region.

¹⁰ Morinj is the place in Montenegro where in 2022 a memorial plaque was placed in the former Morinj camp for Croats in Montenegro during the wars of the 90s.

¹¹ Portal Analitika (2024) Krapović: The position that the ship Jadran belongs to Montenegro will not change, I do not accept negotiations on that topic, available on: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/krapovic-stav-da-jadran-pripada-crnoj-gori-se-nece-promijeniti-ne-prihvatajmo-pregovore-na-tu-temu>

¹² Dan (2024) Anušić: Krapović's views are unacceptable, we must negotiate, available on: <https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/politika/anusic-krapovicevi-stavovi-neprihvatljivi-moramo-pregovarati-5218694>

The conference was also attended by the Montenegrin delegation, including the president and the minister of defence and the minister of foreign affairs. The Montenegrin delegation had meetings with high-ranking officials of other countries, where security policy, European integration and mutual cooperation were discussed. The President of Montenegro had meetings with the presidents of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and officials of other countries such as Great Britain, Turkey and others, as well as the Secretary General of NATO. This platform represents an excellent opportunity to discuss security challenges in the Western Balkan region and Montenegro, as well as the importance of cooperation in overcoming these challenges. The participation of Montenegro in the conference additionally represents a signal of commitment to NATO policy, but also represents an opportunity for greater inclusion of Montenegro into international relations, which will contribute to the visibility of the country at the global level¹³.

In the following period, more intensive work is expected on the implementation of reforms and the fulfilment of criteria, given that the goal is to obtain IBAR. Obtaining IBAR would represent a significant step forward after a long period of stagnation in the implementation of the EU integration policy. This would provide additional motivation for carrying out activities aimed at fulfilling the criteria and closing the chapter. The greater recent involvement of the EU in the Western Balkan region and Montenegro indicates the orientation and interest of the EU in the implementation of the enlargement policy, which is partly due to the geopolitical situation in Europe, so the EU's focus on the countries of the Western Balkans is greater. In any case, this represents a positive signal for Montenegro and the entire region. One of the potential limitations may be a greater overlap between the ruling coalition or the reconstruction of the Government, which may affect the continuity of the process and potentially disrupt the established structure.

¹³ CDM (2024) Milatovic - Stoltenberg: Dedicated to strengthening the credibility of Montenegro as a NATO member, available on: <https://www.cdm.me/politika/milatovic-zatrazio-podrsku-ceske-kandidaturi-crne-gore-za-nestalnu-clanicu-savjeta-bezbjednosti-un-a-za-period-2026-2027-godine/>