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FROM VISION TO REALIZATION: HOW MONTENEGRO COMMUNICATES ITS EUROPEAN PATH

Ana Nenezić

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www.birodi.rs; office@birodi.rs

Author:

Ana Nenezić

Translation:

Alisa Radić

Design and Layout:

Srđan Ilić

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Introduction

Having spent more than a decade negotiating the accession to the European Union, Montenegro currently stands at the crossroads between limited progress and numerous challenges with no solutions in sight. From the recent leader in the negotiation process, the country is now facing a potential suspension of further negotiations.

Montenegro officially applied for membership in the European Union in December 2008, starting the accession negotiations in June 2012. In accordance with the new approach to negotiations, the chapters that were opened first were Chapter 23 - Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, and Chapter 24 - Justice, Freedom and Security. They will remain open until the conclusion of the negotiation process.¹

Over the past 11 years, Montenegro has managed to open all 33 negotiation chapters. However, only three have been temporarily closed: Chapter 25 - Science and Research, Chapter 26 - Education and Culture, and Chapter 31 - Foreign, Security and Defence Policy. The last chapter that was opened, on 30 June 2020,² was chapter 8 – Competition Policy. Since the 30-year rule of the DPS ended at the parliamentary elections of 30 August 2020, and the representatives of the new parliamentary majority - previously in opposition - took power, there have been no significant activities in terms of the accession process.

Generally speaking, the further overall progress in the accession largely depends on the implementation of reforms in the area of the rule of law. Significant steps towards meeting the benchmarks set out in Chapters 23 and 24 are crucial for further progress in the negotiations. The negotiating framework and the revised enlargement methodology, which Montenegro accepted in June 2021, clearly define that no more chapters will be temporarily closed until these benchmarks are met. However, meeting them has proven challenging due to the ongoing political crisis in the country, which is hindering the achievement of political agreement on meeting the necessary requirements for further progress in the negotiations. The European Commission's latest rule of law non-paper regarding Chapters 23 and 24, published in May 2023, indicated that Montenegro **has lost focus on key EU reforms**.³ This warning, unexpectedly direct for this type of report, shows the seriousness of Montenegro's current situation.

The new methodology, based on which the negotiation process has continued, envisages a more focused approach to key political issues and reforms aimed at making the enlargement process more effective, predictable and dynamic.⁴ The accession process should be built on mutual trust and clear obligations of the EU and the Western Balkans, while credibility is to be strengthened through an even stronger focus on fundamental reforms, starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration, and the economy of candidate countries.

One of the key novelties relates to the creation of the so-called thematic clusters, which integrate several negotiation chapters with the aim of directing the political focus of candidate countries to key sectors. However, they also introduce sanctions in case of failure to carry out the necessary reforms and meet the requirements.

Once certain criteria have been met, negotiations on each of the 6 clusters are opened in the form of a single whole. Negotiations on key reforms are opened first and closed last, and progress in these areas determines the overall course of negotiations. This corresponds to the current, so-called “new approach” to negotiations, which was applied for the first time in Montenegro. Technically speaking, this methodology does not significantly differ from the earlier one, but the political impulse from both sides - the EU and the Western Balkans - is extremely important as it places greater focus on key reform processes in the country. As regards Montenegro, which has made considerable progress in the negotiation process, the proposed changes can be integrated into the existing negotiation framework, especially since the New Methodology envisages the alignment of thematic clusters with subcommittees within the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAA).

Montenegro confirmed and accepted the European Commission’s New Methodology of Accession Negotiations in May 2020, formally accepting it at the Intergovernmental Conference in 2021.⁵ Although the Government and political elites generally welcomed the new approach, they also raised several concerns. The Montenegrin Government saw the new methodology as a potential opportunity to speed up the negotiation process, given its provisions for grouping chapters and the “more begets more” principle which implies that more reforms could lead to more benefits and faster progress. However, there were concerns about the principle of “less begets less” and the reversibility clause, which could slow down or stop the process if reforms are not implemented or in the case of democratic backsliding.

It turned out that these concerns were well-founded, because it is precisely the political instability, marked by frequent tensions, polarisation and a lack of constructive dialogue between political parties, that is now the biggest obstacle to the necessary reforms. After the end of the 30-year rule by DPS in 2020, political instability resulted in the fall of two governments after a no-confidence vote in the Parliament of Montenegro, negatively affecting the overall functioning of institutions in the country. Montenegro currently does not have a Minister for European Integration or a Chief Negotiator with the EU, since the previous one resigned in 2022.⁶ Also, the new negotiation structure is in the process of being formed and is not yet operational.

However, the dominant problem that prevents progress in the area of the rule of law, as a precondition for the temporary closure of the remaining negotiation chapters, relates to the judiciary, which has been in a sort of institutional crisis for a long time. For example, from September 2022 until February 2023, the Constitutional Court did not have a quorum to make decisions, which led to the institutional blockade. Although the parliament did appoint three judges in February 2023, thereby ending the deadlock, this Court still has one vacant seat, which is continuing to cause problems with decision-making. Besides the Constitutional Court, Montenegro also still does not have a Supreme State Prosecutor with a full mandate, the President of the Supreme Court and members of the Judicial Council, while members of the Prosecutorial Council were elected without taking into account the recommendations of the Venice Commission.⁷

Since the parliamentary elections in Montenegro have just ended, and the process of forming a new Government is underway, the success in this process and the composition of the new Government will be crucial for determining the future of the negotiation process with the European Union.

The Negotiation Process: From Chapters to Clusters, Progress or Stagnation

Since the accession negotiations with the European Union were formally initiated in June 2012, Montenegro has made some progress that could be considered successful in a technical sense. However, overall, the negotiations with Montenegro were informally “stopped” in 2017, when the last negotiation chapter was temporarily closed. There have been no significant activities since.

The process of joining the European Union requires comprehensive alignment of national legislation with the *EU acquis*. This process is organised into 35 negotiation chapters, each of which covers a specific aspect of the *acquis*. Montenegro has managed to open all the chapters, and to temporarily close three of them.

With the adoption of the new methodology, instead of being divided into 35 negotiation chapters, the negotiation framework has been grouped into 6 clusters⁸: fundamental chapters, internal market, competition and inclusive growth, green agenda and sustainable connectivity, resources, agriculture and cohesion, and external relations. Once the benchmarks are met, negotiations on each of the total of 6 clusters will be opened as a whole. Negotiations in the first cluster, related to fundamental rights, will be opened first and closed last, and progress in these areas will determine the overall course of negotiations.

What caused concern after the adoption of the New Methodology⁹ was related predominantly to the reversibility clause, i.e. the part having to do with the so-called “negative conditionality” in the European Commission’s negotiations with Montenegro, which implies sanctions in case of serious or long-term stagnation or regression. The decision on the proposed mechanisms will be based on the European Commission’s detailed annual report.

The above entails the following:

1. In serious cases, member states may decide to pause negotiations in certain areas or suspend them entirely.¹⁰
2. If necessary, previously closed chapters could be reopened or reconsidered.¹¹
3. The scope and intensity of the EU funding could be reduced, excluding support to the civil society.
4. The benefits of closer integration, such as access to EU programmes and unilateral market access concessions, could be paused or withdrawn.

The most important issues that have remained open and require further reforms include key issues such as the rule of law, freedom of expression, fight against corruption and organised crime, economic reforms, protection of minority rights and public administration reform. They stand at the centre of the negotiation process, meaning that none of the negotiation chapters cannot be temporarily closed until the benchmarks in the above areas are met.

The following is an overview of the dynamics of opening and closing negotiation chapters prior to the adoption of the New Methodology.

Negotiating chapters	Chapter was opened on	Chapter was closed on
1. Free movement of goods	20 June 2017	–
2. Free movement of workers	11 December 2017	–
3. Right of establishment and freedom to provide services	11 December 2017	–
4. Free movement of capital	24 June 2014	–
5. Public procurement	18 December 2013	–
6. Company law	18 December 2013	–
7. Intellectual property law	31 March 2014	–
8. Competition policy	30 June 2020	–
9. Financial services	22 June 2015	–
10. Information society and media	31 March 2014	–
11. Agriculture and rural development	13 December 2012	–
12. Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy	30 June 2016	–
13. Fisheries	30 June 2016	–
14. Transport policy	21 December 2015	–
15. Energy	21 December 2015	-
16. Taxation	30 March 2015	–
17. Economic and monetary policy	25 June 2018	–
18. Statistics	16 December 2014	–
19. Social policy and employment	13 December 2016	–
20. Enterprise and industrial policy	18 December 2013	–
21. Trans-European networks	22 June 2015	–
22. Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments	20 June 2017	–
23. Judiciary and fundamental rights	18 December 2013	-
24. Justice, freedom and security	18 December 2013	-
25. Science and research	18 December 2012	18 Dec 2012
26. Education and culture	15 April 2013	15 April 2013
27. Environment and climate change	10 December 2018	–
28. Consumer and health protection	16 December 2014	–
29. Customs union	16 December 2014	–
30. External relations	30 March 2015	20 June 2017
31. Foreign, security and defence policy	24 June 2014	–
32. Financial control	24 June 2014	–
33. Financial and budgetary provisions	16 December 2014	–
34. Institutions	–	–
35. Other issues	–	–
Progress	33 out of 33	3 out of 33

Table 1. Overview and status of the negotiation chapters ¹²

However, once the New Methodology was adopted, the negotiating chapters were grouped into 6 clusters: Fundamentals; Internal Market; Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth; Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity; Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion; and External Relations.

The following is an overview of the distribution of earlier negotiation chapters into the current negotiation clusters. Thematic clusters integrate several negotiation chapters so that the political focus of candidate countries can be focused on key sectors, but they also include sanctions in case of failure to implement the necessary reforms and meet the requirements. Negotiations on each of the 6 clusters will be opened as a whole, once the benchmarks are met. The cluster approach will not be applied when closing the chapters; instead, the individual chapter approach will be used at the time of temporary closure, just like before.

1. Fundamentals	2. Internal market	3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth	4. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion	6. External relations
23 – Judiciary and fundamental rights	1 – Free movement of goods	10 – Information society and media	14 – Transport policy	11 – Agriculture and rural development	30 – External relations**
24 – Justice, freedom and security	2 – Free movement of workers	16 – Taxation	15 – Energy	12 – Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy	31 – Foreign, security and defence policy
Economic criteria	3 – Right of establishment and freedom to provide services	17 – Economic and monetary policy	21 – Trans-European networks	13 – Fisheries	
Functioning of democratic institutions	4 – Free movement of capital	19 – Social policy and employment	27 – Environment and climate change	22 – Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments	
Public administration reform	6 – Company law	20 – Enterprise and industrial policy*		33 – Financial and budgetary provisions	
5 – Public procurement	7 – Intellectual property rights	25 – Science and research**			
18 – Statistics	8 – Competition policy (has not been opened)	26 – Education and culture**			
32 – Financial control	9 – Financial services	29 – Customs union			
	28 – Consumer and health protection				

Table 2. Overview of the clusters and ratings of individual chapters,
*** Closed chapters*

Fundamental Rights - Freedom of Expression and the Media

Freedom of expression and media independence are the fundamental values of every democratic society and are key indicators in the process of joining the European Union. This is precisely why this issue is positioned as one of the most important within Chapter 23 - Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, now part of Cluster 1 - Fundamentals.

The key problems Montenegro has been facing in this area from the very beginning of the negotiations relate primarily to the need to improve the legal and institutional framework so as to guarantee full freedom and independence of the media and journalists, the area of journalists' protection, media pluralism, and improvement of self-regulation.

The latest report of the European Commission for Montenegro, for the year 2022,¹³ stated that Montenegro has made limited progress, but it also mentioned numerous issues that have not been adequately addressed and settled even despite a full decade of negotiations. However, it was noted that Montenegro has prepared the first media strategy in history, as well as a set of supporting laws - the Law on Media, the Law on Audio-Visual Media Services and the Law on Public Broadcaster RTCG, which govern media-related issues. These were approved by the European commission, but have yet to be adopted by the Montenegrin parliament.

Attacks on journalists have continued. Twenty four cases of violence against journalists were registered in 2021, mainly including threats, intimidation or harassment (but there were also a few cases of physical violence), while 12 new cases were registered in the first 6 months of 2022. The European Commission noted that the law enforcement authorities' response to new cases of violence did improve, but it also mentioned the impossibility of solving earlier cases as the key obstacle to progress in this area. One such case that stands out is the murder of the editor of the daily newspaper *Dan* in 2004, which is still showing no progress. The legal framework for the protection of journalists and other media workers has been improved thanks to the adoption of amendments to the Criminal Code, which provide for stricter penalties for attacks and threats against journalists and for obstructing or preventing their work. However, the lack of effective judicial follow-up in old cases has not been resolved.

The deep political polarisation of the media, accompanied by weak or almost non-existent self-regulation mechanisms, represents a particular challenge. Media financing is another open issue, especially in light of the strengthening of regional competition, which in Montenegro is reflected in the fact that the majority of electronic media are owned by companies based in Serbia. In addition to the above, it is important to also point out the problem of the ever-more present campaigns of disinformation, misinformation and other forms of media manipulation to which the citizens of Montenegro are being exposed, and to which Montenegro has neither an adequate response nor protective mechanisms. The legal solution that enables information portals to operate without prior registration has contributed to the problem. This was especially obvious during the campaigns for the presidential and parliamentary elections in Montenegro in 2023.

As for the operation of the national public broadcasting service RTCG, although the European Commission did note an improvement in the way of reporting, the question of the (lack of) legality of the appointment of the new Managing Director significantly burdens the work of this media. Namely, a final court decision was issued in the previous period confirming that the Managing Director was in a conflict of interest at the time of his appointment, which made said appointment unlawful. However, the Council of the RTCG decided to re-appoint the same person, which opened up a new procedure before the Special State Prosecutor's Office against the members of the Council in connection with this case.

Strategy for Informing the Public about Montenegro's Accession to the European Union

Communication Strategies from 2004 until today

The communication strategy is an important segment of the overall process of a country's European integration. The strategy for informing the public about Montenegro's accession to the European Union is a strategic document of the Government that sets the framework and defines guidelines for effective communication of the European integration of Montenegro to the public.

So far, Montenegro has adopted five communication strategies, each for a period of four years. Each of these strategies referred to a specific integration period and contained a strategic approach to communicating the specificities of the process in specific phases.

The first Communication Strategy for informing the public about the process of Montenegro's accession to the European Union was adopted in September 2004. It defined the main goals and the way public should be informed about the European integration process in Montenegro. The preparation of the first strategic document was characterised by the significant participation of representatives of civil society organisations, who were involved in all the stages of the preparation and implementation of this document.¹⁴

The Communication Strategy for informing the public about the European Union and Montenegro's preparations for membership 2010-2014 was adopted in anticipation of the Opinion of the European Commission and the candidacy.¹⁵ The main goal of the Strategy was to raise awareness in the local public about all the aspects of the process of accession to the European Union, enable better understanding of the rights and responsibilities arising from membership, raise the level of professional knowledge in public and private organisations and institutions, and inform the foreign public about the progress Montenegro is achieving in the adoption of European standards and values.

The third Communication Strategy was adopted in 2014, covering the period until 2018. Its general goal was to contribute to citizens' better understanding of the process of European integration with a focus on the specificities of the negotiation process, and ensure support for the process of accession of Montenegro to the Union. The specificity

of the strategy in question, compared to the previous one, had to do with the development of a completely new system that accompanied its implementation. For the first time, the strategy followed the implementation of the Programme for the accession of Montenegro to the European Union.

Two bodies were formed to monitor the implementation: the Consultative Body and the Operational Body. The Consultative Body consists of members of the working group who had participated in the development of the Communication Strategy, representatives of the EU Delegation in Montenegro and independent experts. Their task is to meet at least twice per year and to monitor the implementation of the Strategy based on Action Plans, perform evaluation and make recommendations for improvement. The Operational Body consists of representatives of entities responsible for the implementation of the Strategy, who prepare the annual Action Plan and implement activities. In addition to the above, the budget for the implementation of activities was defined for the first time. This had been the main obstacle for the implementation of activities listed in earlier strategies.¹⁶

This was followed by the adoption of the Strategy for the period 2019-2022. It related to the communication of the process in the phase when all negotiation chapters were opened, with limited results in the next phase which implies the closing of negotiation chapters. It was important to find a way to maintain the enthusiasm of the citizens of Montenegro. The general goal was to improve citizens' information about the process of European integration and provide support for the process of accession of Montenegro to the EU by introducing new tools and thematic activities. The previously established monitoring structure was maintained, although the expected results in the part of supervision were not realised.¹⁷

The last document was prepared for the period 2023-2026, based on the same pattern and structure, and without the introduction of novelties that could have been expected considering the significantly changed general political social framework and new communication channels and tools which had considerably changed compared to the year 2010. Also, this is the first Strategy whose drafting did not include representatives of civil society organisations. Consequently, its future success is questionable, bearing in mind that it has excluded the multipliers whose activities and results the Strategy mainly relies on. The document does not contain a general goal, but rather several operational ones. The operational goals are: 1) to increase the institutional efficiency in communicating the process of European integration, 2) to strengthen the role of the media in informing citizens about the EU, 3) improved recognition of the process of Montenegro's accession to the European Union in the international public, and 4) the educational system and local self-governments as promoters of EU values.¹⁸ The very way the goals are defined indicates that they cannot be achieved.

All communication strategies contained the analysis of the current situation, action plans with clearly defined actors, key messages, defined implementation time, fulfilment indicators, as well as the means required for implementation. However, despite the existence and implementation of strategic documents in the communication of the integration process, which contained all the elements necessary for success and the achievement of the set goals, the results were limited.

The key success indicator is the assessment of citizens' information about the EU and the negotiation process. According to the data of the public opinion survey agency *De Facto*, which conducts surveys for the needs of the European Union Delegation in Montenegro, citizens say that they are informed less than they used to be. For example, in November 2022, 52% of the respondents considered themselves very well or well informed, in contrast to 2020 when more than 60% felt the same. Data on how informed citizens feel about the process of European integration are quite similar. Namely, the percentage of those who consider themselves very well or well informed fell from 58.3% in 2020 to 46.8% in November 2022. As the main reasons for not being informed, 60.1% of the respondents stated that available information is too general and that topics that are of personal interest to them are not discussed enough. 45.9% stated that there is generally not enough information about this topic in the media, while 45.1% said that there is too much talk about corruption and organised crime, and far less about other topics.

One of the key elements, which is not functional but could significantly improve the success of the Strategy, is the system for measuring the success of defined goals. In order to overcome this, it is necessary to strengthen the work of the established bodies in charge of monitoring and improve the coordination of communication activities, or - more specifically - the Operating Body and the Consultative Body. These bodies are not functional. Although the obligation is prescribed, not a single report has been prepared and published to date.

In the coming period, the Consultative Body and the Operational Body should operate more efficiently to provide a platform for the networking of actors, exchange of information, multiplication of messages and coordination of communication of all entities that are formally and essentially involved in the process communication. Additionally, there is a need to adopt a series of measurable indicators to measure performance. It has been noted that, until now, the monitoring of the implementation of the action plans that accompanied the implementation of the Strategy was based on the mapping of the number of planned and implemented activities. Such a descriptive evaluation method cannot provide a realistic picture; instead, there is a need to introduce measurable indicators to measure the effects of undertaken activities, which is significantly different in terms of effectiveness in relation to information - whether some planned activity was implemented or not.

Characteristics of Communication Strategies - Target Audiences and Messages

The Communication Strategy for informing the public of Montenegro about the process of joining the European Union was set as a strategic document that should serve as the starting framework for all communication activities, with precisely defined goals and activities. The key messages, targeted audiences and activities kept changing depending on the phase of the process at the time of preparation and adoption of the document.

The following is a comparative overview of the characteristics of all communication strategies adopted and implemented by Montenegro, starting from the year 2004.

Communication strategy	2004-2008	2010-2014	2014-2018	2019-2022	2023-2026
Phase of the process	The agreement on the stabilisation and association between Montenegro and the EU was signed and the application for membership in the EU was submitted	EU accession negotiations started on 29 June 2012. The negotiation structure was formed.	The negotiation process is under way. Almost all negotiation chapters have been opened and two have been temporarily closed.	All negotiation chapters have been opened and three have been temporarily closed.	There has been no activity. Halt in Chapters 23 and 24.
Key message(s)	Let's go! Openly, seriously, democratically.	The umbrella message was not defined.	EU4ME. Me for Europe, Europe for me.	EU4ME. The EU is our destination and a better quality of life for citizens is the key goal of our reforms. By joining the EU, Montenegro will retain its identity and gain the ability to decide on important issues. Aid from European funds is already improving the lives of citizens	EU4ME. European integration and reforms are improving Montenegro and bringing the citizens' standard of living closer to the European level
Main goals	1. Inform citizens about the EU integration process 2. Acquaint strategic target groups with activities of the EU integration process 3. Prepare political decision makers for the role they will be playing in the process.	1. Inform citizens 2. Overcome unfounded and incorrect stereotypes related to the integration process 3. Highlight the advantages and responsibilities arising from EU membership 4. Reduce unrealistic expectations in the domestic public 5. Raise the level of general and professional information in the state administration, business and civil sector.	Increase citizens' understanding of the process of European integration and ensure support for the process of Montenegro's accession to the EU.	Provide clear, comprehensive and timely information about the benefits and obligations arising from membership through understandable, attractive and customised messages.	Increase institutional efficiency in communicating the European integration process Strengthen the role of the media in informing citizens about the EU. Improved recognition of the process of Montenegro's accession to the European Union in the international public. The education system and local governments are promoters of EU values.

Target groups	Media, educational institutions, political decision makers, state administration, NGOs, social partners, representatives of the international community.	Multipliers (public opinion drivers), youth, groups vulnerable to changes, creators of international public opinion and decision makers, creators of international public opinion and decision makers, general public in EU member states.	Multipliers (public opinion drivers), youth, groups vulnerable to changes, creators of international public opinion and decision makers, general public in EU member states.	Citizens who support EU membership, citizens who oppose EU membership, citizens without an opinion, youth, international public.	Undecided citizens who oppose EU membership, business community and professional associations, youth, vulnerable groups, creators of international public opinion and decision makers.
Partners	/	Institutions, media, NGOs, economic sector, academic community, local self-government units, religious communities, DEU, embassies, international institutions	The Government, the Assembly, NGOs, academic community, religious communities, unions, diplomatic, consular, cultural and economic representations of Montenegro abroad, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission, DEU	The Government, the Assembly, NGOs, academic community, religious communities, influential public personae and influencers, unions, diplomatic, consular, cultural and economic representations of Montenegro abroad, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission, DEU	DEU in Montenegro, local self-government units, media, scientific-research institutions, NGOs, parliamentary political parties, economic associations and unions, the Assembly (MPs, especially the Committee on European Integration), influential public personae (and digital influencers), artists, religious communities
Communication tools	Media (electronic, print), website publications, brochures, other info materials. round tables, debates.	Media (electronic, print), website publications, public events, info points, personal contacts	Media (electronic, print), website publications, cultural events, Internet services, mobile applications	Media, news portals, social networks, video production	Media, news portals, social networks, video production
Were NGOs included in the creation of documents?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

Table 3: Comparative overview of the characteristics of Montenegrin communication strategies for the period 2004-2026

Negotiations on Montenegro's Accession to the EU through the Prism of the Report on the Realisation of Action Plans for the Implementation of the Strategy of Informing the Public about the Accession of Montenegro to the European Union

The implementation of strategies for informing the public about the accession of Montenegro to the EU is accompanied by adopted action plans that contain a set of activities whose realisation aims to achieve the set goals. Action plans are adopted on an annual basis and their success is measured by annual reports on the implementation of defined activities. Available data indicate that the Government of Montenegro has so far adopted only three implementation reports, namely for the years 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2018. Other reports are not available, and it can therefore reasonably be concluded that the Government of Montenegro neither prepared nor adopted them.

The adopted reports contain indicators of a quantitative nature. In other words, they predominantly focus on reporting on the number of realised activities without showing the measurable qualitative indicators of their success. The reports contain a tabular presentation of activities and information on the degree of implementation.

The report for 2018,¹⁹ which for the first time introduced the principle of linking planned activities and achieved results measured through public opinion surveys, represented a novelty. The report in question showed data on the percentage of support for the overall process, the degree of interest in EU-related information, and the measurement of the correlation between the level of information and the degree of support. The correlation was confirmed by the data – *“The more informed citizens are, the more they support the integration process. The percentage of information among the supporters of integration is 91.6%, while among the opponents it is 77.6%. The least informed are those who are indifferent to the process, i.e. do not have an opinion - 34% of them claim that they are informed about the accession”*.

However, there is a lack of more detailed data that would show which topics are of particular interest to the public, which channels of communication have proven to be the most efficient, and how to fight disinformation and other forms of media manipulation that are present in the public space and can potentially affect support for the process. Also, no information is available on the analysis of the content that is published through defined communication channels, through set target groups. What is missing is an analysis of dominant narratives and a proposal on how to respond to negative trends in a timely fashion.

By analysing all the available documents, it can be concluded that the approach of the competent institutions is strictly formal, aimed at fulfilling obligations without substantial implementation. The absence of documents after 2018 additionally confirms the thesis that EU accession is not Montenegro's priority, and that it can be concluded that the simulation of negotiations with the EU has primacy over the essential and substantive negotiations in the interest of the public.

Negotiations on the Montenegro's Accession to the EU through the Prism of Public Opinion Surveys

Public support for the European integration process is traditionally high. Although the figure has fluctuated over time due to various factors such as the pace of negotiations, internal politics and regional events, it still shows the Montenegrins' constant and strong pro-EU sentiment. The war in Ukraine has further polarised the public opinion. Despite these divisions, the consensus in favour of EU membership firmly remains. Most Montenegrins believe that it is the EU that offers the best path for economic development, political stability and social progress. Therefore, support for the country's membership in the European Union is at a record high. However, the fact that the number of citizens who believe that Montenegro should align its foreign policy with Serbia, Russia and China is growing, should be a cause for concern.

According to a survey the *De Facto* agency conducted for the needs of the EU Delegation in Montenegro in May 2023, the support for Montenegro's membership in the European Union has reached a record 79.3%.²⁰ The results show that 75.9% of citizens believe that Montenegro will become a member of the EU, and the number of those who would vote in a hypothetical referendum on EU membership is growing. More than 90% of citizens would vote in the referendum and 81.1% would support Montenegro's membership in the EU. However, a significant number of respondents (48.1%) believe that the country is not progressing towards membership fast enough. Also, *De Facto*'s data indicate certain changes in the last year within the structure of supporters of the accession. Namely, for the first time since 2013, the percentage of those who mostly support EU accession is higher than those who support it absolutely.

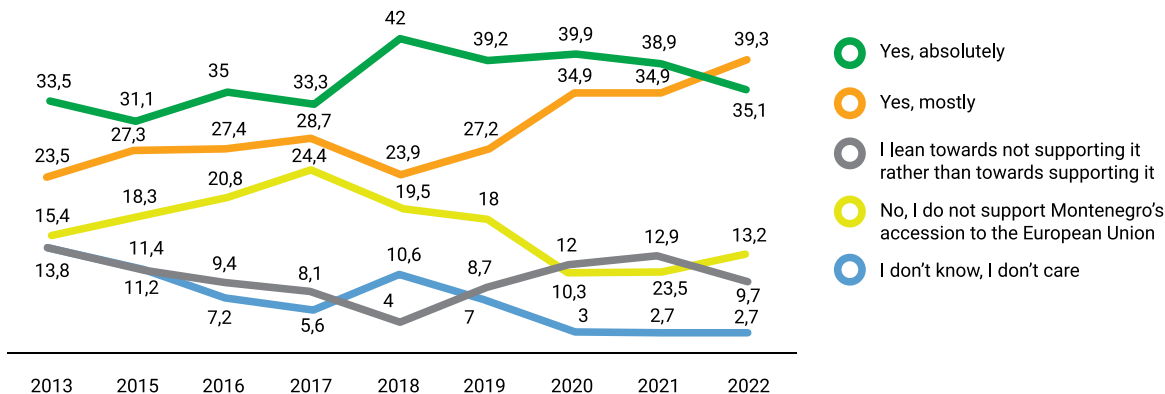


Chart 1: Support for accession to the European Union in relation to the intensity of support, *De Facto*, 2013-2022

The same survey shows that, when the European Union is mentioned, the respondents have predominantly positive associations. Of those who answered this question, only 8.6% had a negative association ("nothing good", "nothing", "disaster", "loss of sovereignty"). Most often, respondents associate the European Union with a better future or a better standard of living (19.5%), with travel and open borders (14.2%), with

the possibility of employment (16.8%) and with democracy and the rule of law (11%). It is interesting to note that citizens of Montenegro are optimistic about the EU accession date. When asked when they expect Montenegro to become a member of the European Union, 21% claimed that it will never happen, while 53.5% expected it to happen between 2025 and 2030.

All other public opinion surveys show similar or identical results. The political public opinion survey that is conducted by the non-governmental organisation CEDEM and has been providing data since 2007, shows that 76% of citizens support the accession of Montenegro to the EU,²¹ which is the highest percentage since the measurement started, that is, since 2007. At the same time, their data show that, if a referendum on Montenegro's EU membership were to be held, 89% of Montenegrin citizens would vote in favour of accession.

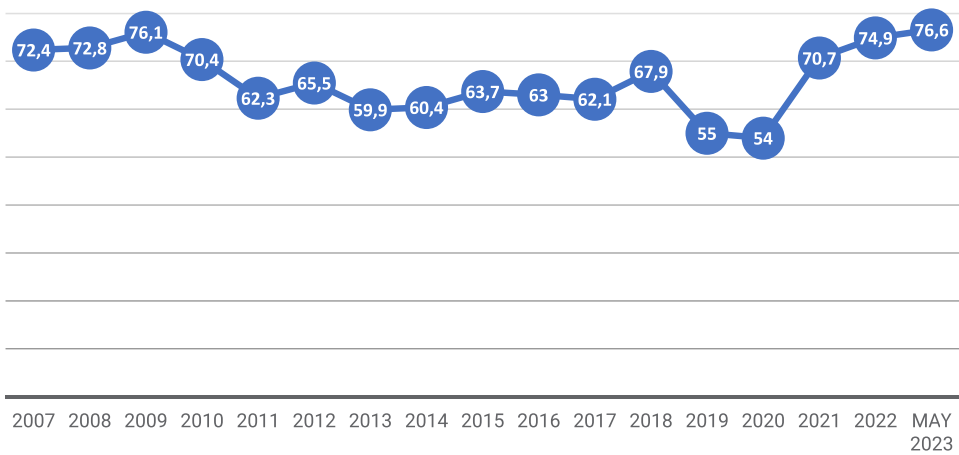


Chart 2. Support for membership in the European Union, political public opinion
Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM), 2007– 2023

As regards alignment with other countries, the same data revealed that 44% of Montenegrin citizens believe that Montenegro should align its foreign policy with that of the European Union, which represents an increase compared to the previous year. The data also show that, at the same time, 32% believe that foreign policy should be aligned with that of Serbia, which represents a significant increase compared to 27% in 2022. Support for Montenegro aligning its foreign policy with that of the United States stands at 20.7%, with that of Russia at 14.9% (a slight decrease compared to 2022), and with that of China at 17.6%, which is a significant increase from 12% in 2022.

The same organisation conducted a survey on citizens' views of the war in Ukraine in July 2022, and it is interesting to analyse the answers through the prism of Montenegro's accession to the EU. The data show that 39.8% of the population sees the war between Russia and Ukraine as Russian aggression, while 32.6% believes that Russia is defending itself against the expansion of NATO. Other participants did not have an opinion on this matter. However, when asked "Who was responsible for the start of the war in Ukraine?", 34.4% of Montenegrins believe that it was Russia, 20% feel that all sides are to blame for it, 16% think that it was the USA, and 11.7 % that it was NATO. Only 2.7% believe that it was Ukraine.

State of Information and Understanding of the European Union in Montenegro after a Decade of Implementation of the Strategy for Informing the Public

The public opinion survey conducted by the Bureau for Social Research BIRODI in October 2022, on an adequate sample of 619 respondents through an online questionnaire, provides more precise data on the level of support, awareness, and understanding of the EU integration process by the citizens of Montenegro. The analysis of these data will serve as the basis for evaluating the dominant media narratives about the accession process in Montenegro. In addition, a comparative analysis of data available from other public opinion survey organisations will enable an in-depth look at the positive and negative effects of the current process of informing the public about the process of Montenegro's accession to the European Union.

First of all, the obtained data provide insight into citizens' perception of possible obstacles for Montenegro's membership in the EU. The most pronounced concern has to do with the poor state of democracy and the rule of law, while other obstacles are similarly distributed among the respondents.

Issue/Obstacle	M (%)	F (%)	Total (%)
Poor state of democracy and the rule of law	37.4	12.9	38.9
Relations with Russia and China	12.6	2.7	11.8
The EU does not want us	13.7	2.6	12.5
The EU is not capable of accepting new members	12.6	3.2	12.3
Most citizens of Montenegro do not want membership in the EU	12.4	3.3	12.3
There are no obstacles on the path to Montenegro's membership in the EU	11.2	4.0	12.1

Table 4. Answers to the question "In your opinion, what are the main obstacles for Montenegro's membership in the EU?"

Further analysis by category shows that the *poor state of democracy and the rule of law* are observed as obstacles by all age categories, but most dominantly by citizens who would vote FOR Montenegro's accession to the European Union and are older than 46-55, have a university degree, and are from the central and northern regions. It is also interesting to note that, contrary to the first category, *relations with Russia and China* are viewed as the main obstacle by citizens aged 46 to 55, who have a lower level of education and would vote against membership in the EU.

As for the opinion that the main obstacle is that *the EU is not capable of accepting new members*, it is held predominantly by citizens aged 46 to 55, with a university degree but from the southern region of the country. Citizens of the older generation, aged 56 to 65, with a secondary school education, from the central and southern regions, believe that *the citizens of Montenegro do not want their country to be a member of the EU*.

On the other side of the spectrum, citizens aged 46 to 55, with a high school education and from the central region who would vote in favour of membership believe that *there are no obstacles on Montenegro's path to the EU*.

When it comes to the opinions of young people, aged 18 to 25, they express concern about the internal political situation in Montenegro and recognise the poor state of democracy and the rule of law as the main obstacles. However, they also show a certain level of optimism towards the country's possible membership in the EU. Young people are generally less focused on international relations, and more on internal challenges and perceptions of the EU.

What is the EU trying to achieve in Montenegro?	M (%)	F (%)	Total (%)
Democratic changes	14.2	8.7	16.3
EU has no clear goal/idea	11.9	4.2	11.5
To include us in the EU market	14.2	6.5	14.8
A better life for citizens of Montenegro	18.2	9.5	19.7
To distance Montenegro from Russia and China	15.5	4.1	14.0
To distance Montenegro from Serbia	10.7	2.0	9.1
To gain access to cheap labour	15.6	4.9	14.7

Table 5. Answers to the question "In your opinion, what is the EU trying to achieve in Montenegro?"

The data show that most respondents believe that the main goal of the EU is to provide a *"better life for the citizens of Montenegro"* (19.7% of the total responses). The next most popular opinion is that the EU wants to achieve *"democratic reforms"* in Montenegro, with 16.3% of the total responses. Among male respondents, the dominant opinion is that the EU wants to provide a *"better life for the citizens of Montenegro"*, with 18.2%, while only 9.5% of the female respondents feel the same.

It is interesting to note the significant difference between male and female respondents when it comes to the perception that the EU wants to *"distance Montenegro from Russia and China"* (men: 15.5%, women: 4.1%) or that the EU just wants *"access to cheap labour"* (men: 15.6%, women: 4.9%). This indicates that different demographic groups have different perceptions about the EU's intentions in Montenegro.

When we include the age and education in the analysis, the data show that the most dominant opinion is that the main goal of the EU is to provide *"a better life for the citizens of Montenegro"*. However, opinions vary depending on the age and level of education. Younger generations and those who are better educated more often believe in democratic reforms and the inclusion of Montenegro in the EU market.

It is also interesting to note that while some age and education groups highlight the EU's potential desire to distance Montenegro from Russia and China, or to gain access to cheap labour, these perceptions are not dominant when one looks at the overall picture.

It is also indicative that citizens in the age group of 26 to 35 have a dominant view that the EU wants “access to cheap labour” (18.4%) and “to include Montenegro in the EU market” (17.7%), while the older generations are of the opinion that the EU will strive to provide a “better life for the citizens of Montenegro” while also strongly believing in its desire for democratic reforms.

When we analyse things from the aspect of education, it is interesting to note that less educated citizens believe that the goal of the EU is to provide a “better life for the citizens of Montenegro”, while those with higher education tend to focus on democratic reforms. In the end, those with the highest level of education, i.e. with master’s or doctoral degrees, equate these two categories and believe in the same percentages that a “better life for the citizens of Montenegro” and “democratic reforms” are the EU’s main goals.

When we include citizens based on their attitudes towards Montenegro’s membership in the EU, i.e. whether they would vote FOR or AGAINST the country’s entry into the EU, we can see that those citizens who would vote against membership firmly believe that the main goal of the EU is to distance Montenegro from Russia and China, and to gain access to cheap labour. Likewise, this group stands out for its view that the EU’s goal is to distance Montenegro from Serbia. The majority of those who believe this are men, with secondary education, who would vote against Montenegro’s membership in the EU.

Viewed overall, while the majority of Montenegrins believe that the EU is striving to improve citizens’ lives and implement democratic reforms, there is a significant perception that concerns economic and geopolitical motives, especially among those who are sceptical of EU membership. These perceptions are influenced by various demographic and geographic factors such as gender, age, education and region.

Category/Gender	M (%)	F (%)	Total (%)
Better standard of living	13.4%	13.7%	13.5%
Access to the EU labour market	15.2%	16.2%	15.5%
Easier travel	13.5%	13.2%	13.4%
More accessible education	8.3%	10.8%	9.1%
Better health services	7.8%	7.5%	7.7%
Better infrastructure	9.7%	10%	9.8%
Properly organised state and democratic institutions	14.1%	15.8%	14.7%
Membership will bring more harm than good	6.5%	4.5%	5.9%
I see no benefits from Montenegro’s membership in the EU	5.9%	5.0%	5.6%
There are no benefits from Montenegro’s membership in the EU	5.1%	2.7%	4.3%

Table 6. Answers to the question “What would be the main benefits for the citizens of Montenegro from Montenegro’s membership in the EU?”

In general, many Montenegrin citizens see potential benefits from EU membership, especially when it comes to access to the labour market, a higher standard of living, easier travel and better organised social institutions. However, there is also a certain percentage of citizens who are sceptical and believe that membership will bring more

harm than good, or do not see any concrete benefits from joining the EU. It is interesting to note that a properly organised state and democratic institutions are the most important features that citizens see as benefits from membership.

Out of a total of 13.54% of respondents who see a *higher standard of living* as the main benefit of Montenegro's membership in the EU, this benefit is most recognised by persons aged 46-55, with higher education and from the central part of Montenegro. Unlike them, the highly educated younger population sees *access to the labour market* and *easier travel* within the EU as the main benefits. When it comes to *properly organised institutions*, these are viewed as the main benefit by highly educated citizens aged 46 to 55.

It is worrying that the largest number of those who do not see or believe that membership would be beneficial belong to the category of the lower educated population that is 36 to 45 years old. Contrary to them, the younger population (18-25 years) in Montenegro generally sees more benefits from EU membership than older respondents do, especially when it comes to access to the labour market, easier travel and more accessible education. It is expected that this group, which will have to live the longest with the consequences of the decision on membership, will be particularly interested in aspects that directly affect their daily lives and future opportunities. The lowest degree of Euroscepticism has been noted precisely in this group.

Question / Gender	M (%)	F (%)	Total (%)
Their support for the undemocratic government in Montenegro	22.3	24.4	22.9
The fact that we, as citizens, are not sufficiently informed about the process of Montenegro's EU accession	14.9	17.1	15.5
Political blackmail	15.4	14.0	15.0
EU is in crisis, stories of a better life are fairytales	13.1	6.7	11.2
They threaten our traditional values	11.0	10.4	10.8
The EU tolerates the violation of the rights of the people I belong to	5.9	7.9	6.5
The EU tolerates the violation of the rights of the religious community I belong to	5.9	5.5	5.8
As citizens, we are not sufficiently asked [involved] in the process of Montenegro's EU accession	3.6	9.1	5.2
Loss of national identity	3.3	2.4	3.1
Pressures to join NATO	2.8	1.2	2.3
They are distancing us from Russia and China	1.8	1.2	1.6

Table 7. Answers to the question "Regardless of whether you are in favour or against Montenegro's membership in the EU, what do you most resent about the EU in relation to Montenegro?"

Generally speaking, when Montenegrin citizens are asked what they most resent about the European Union in relation to Montenegro, there are several key issues that tend to come to the fore. At the top of the list, with 22.9% of responses, is their concern that

the EU supports an undemocratic government. The second most common problem that citizens point out, with 15.5% of responses, is the feeling that they are not sufficiently informed about the process of Montenegro's accession to the EU. The same percentage of respondents (15%) believe that the EU is politically blackmailing the country, which - according to the citizens - makes this the third biggest problem. The relatively high percentage (11.2%) of citizens who believe that the stories about a better life within the Union are just fairytales is worrying, as well as the fact that approximately 10 percent of the population (10.8%) believes that the EU threatens Montenegro's traditional values.

In addition to these main problems, citizens also expressed concern that the EU tolerates the violation of the rights of certain peoples and religious communities, and that citizens are not sufficiently involved in the accession process. The most often expressed concern has to do with the perception that the EU supports an undemocratic government in Montenegro, coupled with strong feelings about political blackmail. In parallel with this, citizens feel uninformed and left out of the integration process, which indicates the need for more transparent communication. Fears related to the loss of national identity and threatened traditional values reflect present cultural and social tensions. These results suggest that those in charge of the process in Montenegro, as well as in the EU, should pay more attention to the perceptions and feelings of the citizens if they wish to establish a stronger relationship and greater trust.

The identified problem of insufficient information is additionally confirmed by the data that shows how many citizens are familiar with the campaign "Me for Europe, Europe for me". The results show that most respondents are not familiar with the campaign. When we look at the data based on gender, men are significantly less informed than women; namely, 85.93% of men have not heard of the campaign, compared to 62.64% of women. When we consider age, the least informed groups are those aged 18-25 and 26-35. In terms of education, those with primary school education are the most informed, while those with higher education are less informed. At the regional level, the southern region has the lowest percentage of those who have heard of the campaign (0.47%). These results suggest the need for a stronger campaign to inform citizens about the above project.

Due to the importance of the campaign and its extremely and surprisingly poor results, we offer a tabular overview of all the categories.

Category	Yes (%)	No (%)	I am not sure (%)
Gender			
Male	0.3	85.9	13.8
Female	14.3	62.6	23.1
Age group			
Up to 18	50.0	50.0	0.0
18 to 25	7.1	75.0	17.9
26 to 35	1.4	80.0	18.6
36 to 45	11.9	75.5	12.6
46 to 55	10.1	71.3	18.5
56 to 65	7.1	77.2	15.7
More than 65	10.0	76.7	13.3
Education			
Elementary school	28.6	57.1	14.3
Secondary school	7.2	74.0	18.8
Gymnasium	9.8	75.4	14.8
College (two-year degree)	6.5	75.7	17.8
University degree	13.9	75.3	10.8
Higher than a university degree (magisterial/doctoral studies)	12.2	73.5	14.3
Region			
Central region	9.9	73.5	16.6
Southern region	0.5	83.7	15.8
Northern region	9.1	74.7	16.2

Table 8. Answers to the question "Have you heard about the campaign entitled "Me for Europe, Europe for me"?"

When asked if they knew of any other campaigns, a dominant percentage of the respondents (90%) said that they did not remember any.

Correlation between Information, Understanding and Support for the EU Integration Process

Support for the EU integration process does not simultaneously imply a high percentage of citizens who are well informed, or that they have a high degree of understanding of what this process truly entails. If a high level of support is not accompanied by a high degree of information and understanding, that is, if the support for the process is not based on real foundations, one can expect the percentage of support to fluctuate, i.e. be sensitive to potential negative events that could significantly change citizens' views about this issue. Above all, negative messages from the European Union about the future of the process, the freezing of the enlargement process, the economic and social upheavals, the strengthening of EU scepticism and the right-wing political parties that oppose EU accession are just some of the indicators that can cause a decline in support for the process, especially in situations where there is no real basis for a high level of support based on informed citizens who have a full understanding of the process and all its positive features, as well as of the obligations that Montenegro is undertaking.

The above presented public opinion survey data show that, although support for the EU integration process is high, continuous and relatively stable, there is a certain dynamic among the supporters of moving from firm to softer opinions.

In order to understand the importance of being informed and understanding in the context of support for the process of European integration, it is necessary to better understand the mechanisms of how information affects the perception of citizens.

Being informed as the first step:

The level of information is the starting point of any analysis. In order for citizens to have a real picture of something, they must first have access to reliable information about that topic. In the context of EU integration, this implies an understanding of the basic principles of the European Union, as well as an understanding of the negotiation process and the advantages and challenges of membership. However, just providing information is not enough. Information should be presented in an accessible and comprehensible way, so that citizens can easily adopt them.

Understanding as the key link:

Once information is available, the step that follows is understanding. This is not just about superficial knowledge, but about a deep understanding of how EU integration can affect the lives of citizens, their everyday living, their economy, culture and other aspects of society. With deep understanding, citizens are able to critically evaluate information, distinguish fact from misinformation, and form their opinion based on knowledge instead of prejudice.

Support as the result of being informed and understanding:

Authentic support for the EU integration process comes as a result of a combination of being informed and understanding. A citizen who is informed and understands the benefits and challenges of EU membership is more likely to provide real and lasting support to the process. Support based on information and understanding is less sensitive to short-term political changes, propaganda or misinformation. Informed citizens are more stable “pillars” of support because their support comes from a conscious decision, not a superficial opinion.

The analysis of the Montenegrin strategic documents aimed at increasing information and understanding of this process show that the process is far from being complete. Despite progress on the path to membership, citizens’ perception of EU integration can be easily clouded by incomplete information or misinformation.

As Montenegro is currently in the “rest” phase - given that the last negotiation chapter was closed in 2017, while the last negotiation chapter was opened in 2020 - it is clear that the negotiation process is not progressing at the expected pace. In addition, the deep political and social polarisation based predominantly on ethno-national divisions, and the absence of dialogue between key political actors that prevents progress in Chapter 23 - Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, which is a prerequisite for negotiations to continue, are risks that can lead to fatigue, i.e. citizens’ reduced expectations that Montenegro has a real chance of becoming the next member of the European Union.

If Montenegro does not make the necessary efforts to educate and inform its citizens about the process of European integration, it will find itself facing a number of potential consequences:

1. **Unstable support:** As it was already pointed out, support based on superficial understanding can easily fluctuate. Any negative news or challenges can result in a drastic drop in citizens’ support.
2. **Manipulation of information:** The absence of official, clear information opens up space for spreading disinformation and half-truths, which can be used by Eurosceptic groups.
3. **Missed opportunities:** Informed citizens are in a position to actively participate in the process, identify opportunities and take advantage of EU membership, while uninformed citizens may miss these opportunities.
4. **Social polarisation:** Lack of understanding can lead to the creation of fissures in society, where a group of citizens can feel excluded from or uninformed about the integration process.
5. **Slower progress in negotiations:** If citizens do not understand or support the reforms required for EU membership, said reforms may be more difficult to implement, which could slow down the negotiation process itself through support for political structures that oppose the reform processes.

6. **Increased external vulnerability:** Lack of information can lead to a decrease in the state's ability to resist external pressures or influences that may have conflicting interests in relation to EU integration and lead to stronger support for other actors such as Russia, China and others. The presented data show that this process is already present, and that citizens' support for it is growing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

Montenegro's negotiation process with the European Union

1. Montenegro has opened all the negotiation chapters, but only three have been temporarily closed. Overall progress in the negotiations is largely stagnating. The implementation of reforms in the area of the rule of law, which is primarily conditioned by political will and the possibility of establishing a political dialogue among different political subjects, is the key obstacle to further progress in the negotiations.
2. Montenegro is facing serious challenges in the process of accession to the European Union, including lack of political will, political instability, an ineffective judiciary and limited progress in the implementation of key reforms. The European Commission's conclusion that Montenegro has lost its focus on key EU reforms, and that the results in the area 23 - Judiciary and Fundamental Rights have been limited indicates the need to intensify the negotiation process by establishing a dialogue among all political actors.
3. The existing political framework, characterised by political tensions and the absence of constructive dialogue, makes the reform process difficult.

Freedom of expression and the media

4. Progress in the area of freedom of expression and the media has been limited. Improvement is needed in the areas of journalist protection, media pluralism and self-regulation. There is a continuing problem of violence and attacks on journalists, with 24 registered cases in 2021 and an additional 12 cases in the first half of 2022. Although Montenegro has prepared the first set of media laws, they have not yet been adopted by the Parliament.
5. The deep political polarisation of the media is a special challenge, with weak or almost non-existent mechanisms of self-regulation. Disinformation and media manipulation are increasingly present in the public space. Montenegro has no established mechanisms to respond to this challenge.

Communication strategy for informing the public about Montenegro's accession to the European Union

6. The Communication Strategy plays a key role in the process of Montenegro's accession to the European Union. Involvement of the general public in all the phases of accession is crucial for the success of the process. Although the support of citizens is at a record high, it is not an indicator that citizens are well informed. Public support for the European integration process is traditionally high, but the citizens' awareness of the EU and the negotiation process has decreased compared to the previous period. The fact that there is a growing number of citizens who believe that Montenegro should align its foreign policy with that of Serbia, Russia and China should be a cause for concern.

7. Despite the development and implementation (from 2004 to 2023) of five communication strategies that contained all the necessary elements for success, the results have been limited. There is a problem with measuring the success of strategies - the system for measuring the success of defined goals is not functional; it is not based on measurable indicators, but rather relies on simple figures showing realised v. planned activities, without measuring their impact.
8. The last Communication Strategy, adopted by the Government of Montenegro for the period 2023-2026, did not introduce the necessary innovations that would take into account the changed political and social framework and the evolution of communication channels and tools.
9. The break in cooperation between the Government of Montenegro and other key actors is a cause for concern. The Government of Montenegro should better coordinate efforts with the civil society, the media and educational institutions in order to improve citizens' information about the EU accession process. Also, there is a need to intensify inter-institutional cooperation in order to ensure consistent and effective way to inform the public about the EU accession process.

Recommendations:

Montenegro's negotiation process with the European Union

1. *Strengthening of political stability:* The continuation of the negotiation process requires a stable Government. It is necessary to make the EU integration process a priority for the entire society and direct all resources towards achieving this goal. Without political stability and a high level of political consent of all political subjects, it will not be possible to implement the required reform processes and advance on the path to the EU.
2. *Focus on rule of law reforms:* Montenegro should intensify its efforts to improve the rule of law system. It is necessary to achieve political agreement and appoint heads of key judicial institutions, which would unblock the justice system.
3. *Strengthening of institutional capacities:* It is recommended to strengthen the capacities of institutions that are crucial to the negotiation process with the EU, and to undertake activities aimed at protecting the "institutional memory" after the political changes. Enable the inclusion of expert staff in positions that are key for the EU integration process, such as the Chief Negotiator with the EU.
4. *Transparency and citizen involvement:* Increasing the transparency of the accession process and better informing the citizens about the benefits and challenges of EU membership could help strengthen support for reform processes.
5. *Active engagement with the EU:* Montenegro must remain active in the dialogue with the EU, showing its commitment to the reform process but also highlighting the challenges it is facing.

Communication strategy for informing the public about Montenegro's accession to the European Union

6. *Develop new approaches in the Communication Strategy:* Considering the changes in the media landscape and technological progress, the new Communication Strategy should include innovative communication methods and channels. This could include using digital and social media to reach a wider audience, including younger generations.
7. *Involve civil society in the development of communication strategies:* The participation of representatives of the civil society can improve the communication strategy and increase its success, as the strategy largely relies on their activities and results.
8. *Improve the system of measuring the success of defined goals:* This could include strengthening the work of the Consultative Body and the Operational Body, and the adoption of measurable indicators for evaluating the effects of undertaken activities.
9. *Adapt the content of information presented to the public:* The main reasons why citizens feel that they are not sufficiently informed are: the fact that information

is too general and the lack of discussion on topics that are of personal interest to them. The Strategy should focus on providing more specific, locally relevant information.

10. *Use new communication channels and tools*: The last Strategy did not introduce the innovations that are needed considering the changed framework and the evolution of communication channels and tools. It would be useful to take advantage of new communication channels and technologies to reach a wider audience and provide updated information.
11. *Transparency and regular reporting*: It is necessary to improve the process of reporting on the implementation of strategies. It is necessary to prepare and publish reports on the implemented activities and their impact and efficiency.
12. *Public opinion surveys*: Continuously conduct public opinion surveys in order to better understand citizens' opinions, expectations and concerns regarding EU accession. This information can be useful for designing communication strategies that would be in line with citizens' perceptions and needs.
13. *Increase media capacity*: Additional training should be provided for journalists and media professionals to increase their ability to provide accurate, impartial and comprehensive information on the EU accession process. This approach will ensure better reporting on this topic.
14. *Educate citizens*: It is necessary to recognise the importance of education on the topic of the EU accession process. Schools, universities and other educational institutions should be actively involved in informing citizens about said process.
15. *Focus on the positive aspects of membership*: Communication should emphasise the positive aspects of EU membership such as economic development, political stability and social progress. It is necessary to better highlight the concrete benefits of EU membership, such as access to EU funds, free movement of citizens and access to the EU market.
16. *European values*: It is important to simultaneously carry out strategic activities aimed at strengthening the common European identity. That way the European Union will not be viewed only as a rational opportunity to improve the standard of living, but also as an ideologically desirable framework for the development of democracy and democratic principles.
17. *Adapt messages to reflect regional differences*: The communication strategy should take into account the different regional and social contexts within the country. EU accession can have different implications for different groups of people, and it is important that communication strategies be adapted to these differences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ana Nenezić, executive director of the Institute for Social and Political Research - Analytico, is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Podgorica, University of Montenegro, in the field of international relations. Previously, she earned a master's degree in political communication and media at the University of Missouri, in the United States, as a Fulbright scholar, while at the same time she was engaged as a research associate at the Institute for Political Communication at the same university. She also completed her master's studies at the Department of European Studies, Faculty of Political Sciences in Podgorica, University of Montenegro, where she is to defend her master's thesis. In addition, she graduated from the Faculty of Law, University of Montenegro.

Ana was a member of the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) between Montenegro and the European Economic and Social Committee, and at the same time a member of the Working Group for Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) within the Montenegrin accession negotiations for EU membership. In addition, she was a member of the Advisory Body for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Implementation of the Public Information Strategy on Montenegro's Accession to the EU and a member of the Working Body for the development of this Strategy.

Ana is the author and co-author of numerous publications, analyses and articles focusing on various aspects of democracy, European integration, elections and freedom of expression.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This publication is written within the project “Fundamentals in focus: European integration beyond action plans”. The overall objective of this project is to substantively contribute to the sustainable rule of law reforms in Serbia and Montenegro by bridging the gaps between political criteria and the rule of law reforms under Cluster I within the new EU enlargement methodology.

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- 10 Point 23: Suspension of negotiations and proposing conditions for their possible continuation.
- 11 Point 44: If the negotiations are taking place over a longer period of time, or when the chapter is being revised to incorporate new elements such as new *acquis*, the existing benchmarks will be updated.
- Point 46: In the case of temporarily closed chapters, the Commission can recommend that negotiations be reopened, especially if Montenegro does not meet important benchmarks or does not fulfil its obligations.
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Biro za društvena istraživanja



Za integritet • javnost • inkluziju

Beograd, septembar 2023.