

BULLETIN

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Integration of Montenegro into the European Union

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Montenegro has a chance to become a leader in the integration of the Western Balkans countries with the EU, after Croatia's accession negotiations concluded in June 2011. The European Commission has welcomed Montenegro's progress in areas defined as key by the EU. This country's government recently adopted a further package of reforms and took steps to improve relations with its neighbours. Its ambition is to start the accession negotiations of Montenegro later this year, which also is an objective held by the Polish Presidency of the EU Council.

Status of Montenegro's European Integration Process. On 21 June, a Stabilisation and Association Council meeting was held between the European Union and Montenegro. This body supervises the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which came into force in May 2010. It was confirmed that Montenegro was fulfilling the criteria required by the EU. These were set out in October 2010 by the European Commission on the occasion of its opinion in favour of granting Montenegro candidate status for EU membership. The conditions must be met before the start of accession negotiations. These conditions include the effective fight against corruption and organized crime, strengthening the role of parliament, improvements in the conduct of elections, modernizing administration, work on increasing judicial independence, action on media freedoms, strengthening state cooperation with NGOs and actions to counter discrimination based on ethnicity.

The Stabilisation and Association Council welcomed Montenegro's adoption of a law on the facilitation of both media and NGO functioning as well as the government's actions aimed at strengthening human rights and protection of minority rights. At the same time, the council drew attention to the fact that some regulations in these areas have not yet been implemented. It also welcomed the country's steps towards both the improvement of judicial independence and facilitations for administration. Moreover, the council noted Montenegro's progress in harmonising the law in many other areas and encouraged further efforts aimed at legal adjustments to the EU standards.

However, Montenegro was criticized for being too reluctant to both further enhance the functioning of parliament or improve electoral law. Despite those factors, Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle positively assessed the actions taken by the Montenegrin government and encouraged it to complete the implementation of ongoing reforms in these areas. Simultaneously, he guaranteed the Commission's readiness to provide both technical and financial support for the process.

Montenegro is the youngest country in Europe aside from Kosovo. Following the referendum held in May 2006, it withdrew from the union that had been co-created with Serbia. With 625,000 inhabitants, Montenegro is the smallest country by population in the Western Balkans. Since its declaration of independence on 3 June 2006, the country aspires to integrate with the European Union. It submitted its application for EU membership in December 2008. Montenegro's public support in 2010 for its integration with the EU was at 73%.

Domestic Situation. So far, the EU has not always spoken positively about the democratization of Montenegro. In annual reports, the European Commission was, above all, concerned about the insufficiency of courts and administration and the ineffectiveness in the fight against organized crime and corruption. Moreover, among other things, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini stressed the unsatisfactory cooperation his country was having with Montenegro in combating transnational organized crime. This was on the occasion of the 2010 action held by, among others, the Serbian

police, which prevented the smuggling of more than two tons of cocaine from Uruguay to the Balkans. A few years ago, the former Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović was even accused by Italian prosecutors of playing a role in tobacco goods' smuggling in the 1990s. Eventually the case was dropped in 2009.

According to a report by Transparency International that was published in 2010, Montenegro was the only country in the Western Balkans that experienced a decrease in the effectiveness of its fight against corruption. Although in that region only Croatia and Macedonia were more effective at combating this phenomenon, corruption in Montenegro remains too common. It not only takes the traditional form but also is present in nepotism, which is seen as, among other ways, making use of family connections for employment in public administration. The opposition has often criticized Prime Minister Đukanović of corruption. Since 1991 (when Montenegro was part of Yugoslavia), Đukanović has served fourteen years as prime minister and five as president of Montenegro. According to the opposition, during that time Đukanović managed to subordinate the entire state apparatus. The opposition parties believe that his resignation from the post of prime minister in December 2010 was the price Montenegro had to pay to achieve candidate status for EU membership. Đukanović was replaced by 34-year-old Igor Lukšić, whose strategic goal is to further integrate Montenegro into the European Union.

In 2010, Montenegro recorded 1.1% economic growth and reached a GDP of \$10,700 per person (purchasing power parity). The International Monetary Fund's forecasts for 2011 predict growth of 2%, which is the same for the inflation rate. The unemployment rate in Montenegro was 20% in the previous year. In 2002, the country adopted the euro as its currency, which replaced the previously used German Mark.

Montenegro's Relations with Its Neighbours. One of the conditions for the Western Balkans countries' integration with the EU is to maintain good neighbourly relations with the states in the region. Montenegro maintains good relations with Croatia. However, even with the consent of both states to submit a joint application to the International Court of Justice about the Prevlaka peninsula, the question of ownership of the territory remains unresolved. Montenegro maintains correct relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo.

Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo's independence in October 2008 led to a deterioration of its relations with Serbia. Moreover, the government in Belgrade accused Montenegro of a lack of respect for the local Serb community, which according to this year's census represents 29% of the population. Another problem in the relations between the countries is the lack of official recognition of the Serbian language, which is used by 44% of Montenegro's population. A further issue has been the creation of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which is neither recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church (which holds authority over Montenegro and other former Yugoslav countries) nor by the other Eastern churches.

A sign of warming, though, in the relations between Montenegro and Serbia was a visit by Montenegro Prime Minister Igor Lukšić on 20 July to Belgrade. Serbia was the first country in the region visited by the new head of the Montenegrin government. The authorities of both countries agreed to cooperate to resolve disputes and to support each other in the EU integration process.

Perspective. Just two weeks after the meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council, the Montenegrin government adopted a further package of reforms of the civil service, with the aim to de-politicize the administration. If the implementation of the adopted law proceeds smoothly and if the Montenegrin government reaches a compromise with the opposition on changes in the election law and adopts the EU recommendations on the Parliament's work regulations, then it is likely that in October the European Commission will be in favour of starting Montenegro's accession negotiations with the Union.

The initiation of negotiations with Montenegro—besides signing the accession treaty with Croatia and granting Serbia candidate status for EU membership—is one of the objectives of the enlargement policy of the Polish Presidency of the EU Council. Croatia's example shows that the objectives outlined in detail in the accession negotiations mobilized the government to implement the reforms, the effects of which are visible in the closing of subsequent negotiation chapters. Poland should, therefore, continue to support Montenegro's EU aspirations and indicate that if the country meets the criteria posed by the Commission, the Presidency will make every effort to immediately start the Balkan country's negotiations with the EU. Montenegro would become the second country in the Western Balkans—apart from Croatia—to have reached this stage in integration with the European Union. Intensive Polish activities for the integration of the Balkans with the EU not only would confirm its commitment to promote the EU open-door policy, but also would have a positive impact on the evaluation of the Presidency.