



BULLETIN

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Montenegro's Marathon: Halfway to the EU, Last Lap to NATO

Tomasz Żornaczuk

The accession negotiations with Montenegro that started three years ago reveal the European Union's new approach to enlargement policy. So far, the talks remain as dynamic as the Balkans and it is particularly important to maintain the pace in part because of the limited chances for quick success with integration among the other countries in the region. The transformational achievements of Montenegro should be used by both the EU and NATO to send a clear signal that the Balkans remain of interest to the Euro-Atlantic community, especially in the context of further extending the area of democracy in Europe.

Montenegro's Halfway Point. At the end of June, the European Commission opened two more chapters in Montenegro's process of accession to the EU. This means that three years after the initiation of the negotiations the government in Podgorica has discussed 20 out of the 35 areas, and two of them—the least controversial sections on science and research as well as education and culture—have been already closed. This negotiation pace is similar to that of Croatia, which after three years had held talks on 21 chapters and managed to reach the end in three more years. Podgorica should therefore be able to repeat this result and if the usual two-year ratification process of the Accession Treaty holds true it could enter the EU in 2020.

Despite a similar pace in the negotiations, the accession process of both countries to the EU is slightly different. This is because the EC introduced several new rules between the countries' negotiation periods that allow for more time to study the quality of a candidate's democratic transition. First the so-called screening, that is, a check on how its national law is aligned with EU law in a given area, occurs before the opening of negotiations. Second, the talks in chapters 23 and 24 on the areas of freedom, justice and security, and on judiciary and fundamental rights, which together are considered to be the most difficult ones, start in the second year and not at the end of negotiations as was the case with Croatia. Third, the Commission has clearly highlighted the need to involve civil society organisations, which has since led representatives of such groups in Montenegro to be included in the working groups that negotiate accession.

Problems with the Balkan Champion. In contrast to Croatia, Montenegro does not have bilateral disputes with neighbours who could block its talks with the EU. Yet, it struggles with a number of other problems that are typical for the region. Foremost is the lack of media freedom. In the "Reporters without Borders" ranking of 2014, Montenegro was 114th, between Qatar and Tajikistan, among 180 countries. This is one of the weakest results in Europe and—together with Macedonia which has been plunged into corruption scandals—the worst in the Balkans. In the last four years, the country has dropped nine positions and this negative trend reveals a deepening of the phenomenon despite the acceleration of negotiations with the EU. Beatings of journalists, a bomb in front of an opposition newspaper, and other such examples of abuse show disregard of the problem by the state. The lack of Montenegro's progress in this area is regularly pointed out by the EC, recently also by the European Parliament (in a resolution from March), and even by heads of Member States.

The limited criticism from media fails to mobilise the ruling elites to engage in the fight against corruption. In Transparency International's 2014 index, Montenegro is at 76th in the world, thus higher than its Balkans neighbours,

however this achievement is tempered by its neighbours in the global rankings—next to São Tomé and Príncipe and just behind Swaziland and Senegal. According to Montenegro's authorities, the remedy to this dismal rank will come with offices that are now being formed: an agency against corruption and a special prosecutor for combating organised crime and corruption. The creation of a new institutional framework in the country is in response to EU criticism of the nation's Public Prosecutor General's office, which until now has held all anti-corruption instruments. Prosecutors were criticized for their passivity, neglect of media reports about corruption, prolonging processes and succumbing to political pressure. Moreover, this latter issue is a particular challenge for the EU: Montenegro's political elite repeatedly has to face allegations of abuse of power and violations of the law.

Moderate political will is linked to yet another concern, although one usually formulated only unofficially, of the EU and NGOs regarding the hermetic nature of the Montenegrin political scene. Since the early 1990s, the main party that has formed or participated in the various governments remains the centre-left Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which currently has 31 deputies in the 81-seat parliament. Prime Minister Milo Đukanović now is in his fourth term in that office and was previously the president for five years. In turn, President Filip Vujanović, also related to DPS, has held his position since 2003, having previously served as prime minister. Such a cemented political scene in Montenegro protects the country from sudden political shocks but hardly helps it to implement reform measures, including in the fight against corruption. The recent election of Đukanović for another term as chairman of DPS (in office since 1998) testifies to the lack of understanding of the problem by the authorities and the absence of real ideas to solve it.

Direction: the West. The involvement of the government in negotiations with the EU stems from its clear foreign policy orientation to the West. In contrast to neighbouring Serbia, Montenegro joined the sanctions against Russia—even though it is not a requirement for EU accession—and in recent times has taken a number of measures to reduce the Kremlin's influence in the country. Some of the actions of Đukanović's government, such as not allowing Russian warships into the port of Bar in December 2013, led to a cooling of relations between the countries and, what is more, may have a negative effect on Montenegro's economy in which direct investments from Russia play an important role (15% in 2002-2013). Moscow is also an important partner in trade and tourism. Despite this, Podgorica consistently synchronises its policy with the EU: according to the EC, the government has started to implement all decisions of the European Council from 2014, which is manifested even in such exotic topics for Montenegro as support of EU sanctions on representatives of the former government in Tunisia.

All these treatments serve to move the country closer not only to the EU but also to NATO. Montenegro hoped to receive an invitation to join the Alliance during last year's summit in Newport, Wales, but despite the inclusion of the country to the Membership Action Plan (MAP), a positive evaluation of the partnership objectives, and overall defence reform, the decision was postponed to 2015. With favourable positions from the United States, Germany and the Visegrad Group members, including Poland, which next year will host the NATO summit, lead to the conclusion that in the coming months an offer from NATO will be formulated. Moreover, a willingness to engage in dialogue on NATO enlargement was confirmed by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg during his June visit to Podgorica. A formal invitation for Montenegro should become further impetus to take up the fight with opaque laws and corruption but it also brings a challenge to the public, among which support for integration has not exceeded 50%.

The Need for Integration Success. Despite the mistakes and omissions of the government in Podgorica, the EU should continue the accession negotiations without additional political conditions and take care to keep the talks' pace, which is slower than it was for the countries of Central Europe. This is even truer since Montenegro remains the only country in the Balkans that is in fact discussing membership; Serbia formally launched negotiations a year and a half ago, but has not yet opened any chapter. Therefore, the success of negotiations with Podgorica will in great measure determine the dynamics of EU enlargement policy. The Union should consistently work to strengthen the independence of state institutions that oversee the proper conduct of Montenegro's transformation. To this aim, close cooperation with local civil society organisations may turn out to be helpful, and support for them should be an important element of this task.

From the point of view of countries interested in the Balkans' Euro-Atlantic integration, the need to indicate that NATO has not given up on its agenda for stabilisation and democratisation of the region is no less important. The accession of Montenegro would be confirmation not only of the Alliance's open door policy but also its attractiveness despite difficulties in international relations in Europe at the moment. This would also have a significant regional impact: Montenegro would be the first Balkan Member State with a large Serb community (29% of the population), which traditionally opposes integration with NATO. This, in turn, could help build greater understanding of the Trans-Atlantic idea in the other Balkan countries, which, due to scepticism of NATO, are more prone to seek cooperation with actors interested in weakening the Alliance.