

Enlargement: Montenegro

Introduction

Widely recognised as the forerunner for EU accession, Montenegro has closed 13 of 33 chapters of the *acquis*¹. Its government has set itself a deadline of the end of this year to close the remaining 20, and having already closed one chapter in 2026, the prime minister is aiming for accession in 2028². This would make Montenegro the third former Yugoslav republic to join. As a small country, with a population less than 1% of that of the EU as a whole³, Montenegro would allow the EU to circumvent the debate about treaty reform and other changes needed for greater enlargement, while proving enlargement is still possible after a drought of 13 years. The remaining chapters however, contain certain challenges, including provisions on rule of law and judicial independence⁴.

Challenges

Introduction: Party Politics & Popular Sentiment

The current government of Montenegro, the Spajić cabinet, has been in power since 31 October 2023. It is composed of PES (Europe Now Movement, 20 seats), NSD (New Serb Democracy, 9 seats), DCG (Democratic Montenegro, 7 seats), and 4 smaller parties including Bosniak and Albanian minority parties. While the first among those is staunchly pro-European, the second party grouping is described as Serbian nationalist and softly Trumpist. The main opposition is the DPS (Democratic Party of Socialists, 16 seats), a populist pro-European party which was in government for the majority of Montenegro's independent history^{5,6}.

In terms of popular demand, as of 2025, 59% of Montenegrins believe EU membership would be good, a recovery from 39% the year before. Maintaining popular sentiment is important to push the government towards the EU⁷.

Difficult Chapters

As mentioned, the main challenge to be overcome is the difficult chapters that remain, namely 23: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and 24: Justice, Freedom and Security. These two chapters require sustained efforts to ensure an independent judiciary, prosecute corruption and tackle organised crime. The Council may also be particularly stringent on these chapters, having seen the backsliding in certain EU countries since accession. A significant setback for Montenegro has been the failure to nominate new judges to the constitutional court, after the parliament terminated a judge's mandate due to a pension law in December 2024⁸. Even through to February 2026, while one judge has been elected to the court, two vacancies remain⁹. The election of these judges is crucial for the accession process¹⁰, and the European Commission urged Montenegro to 'proceed with appointments to high-level judicial positions, including the Constitutional Court, through merit-based and transparent procedures'¹¹.

Bilateral Relations

Although compared to other accession hopefuls Montenegro has few bilateral tensions with EU countries, certain elements of the governing coalition have created difficulties with neighbouring Croatia, who also acts as a key proponent of Montenegro's accession. As discussed in the previous section, Montenegro's government contains a Serbian nationalist element, which in 2024 pushed for the adoption of a resolution on genocide in WW2 camps^{12,13}, among them Jasenovac, which was run by the Ustaše¹⁴. The Croatian foreign ministry condemned this resolution for politicising the victims of the camp and declared that Montenegro had ignored the call 'not to take actions that could negatively impact [...] Montenegro's European path'. Nonetheless, Montenegro's accession talks have been on track, with several chapters having been closed since, indicating that the Croatian government has allowed progress after the sharp condemnation.

Responses

Institutional Support

The main response to these challenges should be support from the EU to guide Montenegro's reforms. An example of this was the mediation by the EU for the aforementioned constitutional court crisis. The EU diffused the crisis by negotiating an agreement between the parties to seek the opinion of the Venice Commission⁸, which issued its draft opinion in December.

Maintaining EU Credibility

The other main response is to maintain the EU's credibility so as to push the Montenegrin people towards the EU. While popularity of the EU in the country is currently high, it must remain so to drive the political parties to the necessary reforms that need to take place for EU accession.

Notes

¹ European Council, “EU and Montenegro Provisionally Close Another Chapter in Accession Negotiations,” news release, January 26, 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/01/26/eu-and-montenegro-provisionally-close-another-chapter-in-accession-negotiations/>.

² Dusica Tomovic, “Montenegro in 2026: EU Accession Hopes Building Despite Judiciary Doubts,” *Balkan Insight*, January 13, 2026, <https://balkaninsight.com/2026/01/13/montenegro-in-2026-eu-accession-hopes-building-despite-judiciary-doubts/>.

³ Eurostat, “Population on 1 January,” dataset [tps00001], last updated October 14, 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00001/default/table?lang=en>.

⁴ *The New Union Post*, “How Far Are Candidate Countries Along the Path of EU Accession Negotiations?,” August 12, 2025, last modified January 26, 2026, <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/08/12/eu-accession-negotiations-all-chapters/>.

⁵ Marta Szpala, “Montenegro’s New Government: A Long-Awaited Stabilisation of the Executive?,” Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), November 6, 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-11-06/montenegros-new-government-long-awaited-stabilisation-executive>.

⁶ Wikipedia, s.v. “Parliament of Montenegro,” last modified February 7, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Parliament_of_Montenegro&oldid=1337084902.

⁷ Regional Cooperation Council, “Balkan Public Barometer,” database, accessed February 11, 2026, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public>.

⁸ Sofija Popović, “Political Turmoil over Constitutional Court Dispute: A Challenge to the Montenegrin EU Reform Path?,” *European Western Balkans*, April 3, 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/04/03/political-turmoil-over-constitutional-court-dispute-a-challenge-to-the-montenegrin-eu-reform-path/>.

⁹ “Montenegro Appoints One New Judge, Institutions Remains Incomplete,” *European Western Balkans*, November 27, 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/11/27/montenegro-appoints-one-new-judge-institutions-remains-incomplete>.

¹⁰ “Milatovićev Kabinet: Ko blokira izbor sudija Ustavnog suda, blokira put Crne Gore ka EU,” *Pobjeda*, February 8, 2026, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/milatovicev-kabinet-ko-blokira-izbor-sudija-ustavnog-suda-blokira-put-crne-gore-ka-eu>.

¹¹ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2025*, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, October 29, 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9ae69ea7-81d6-4d6a-a204-bd32a379d51d_en?filename=montenegro-report-2025.pdf.

¹² “Montenegro Adopted the Resolution on Genocide in Jasenovac, Dachau and Mauthausen Camps,” *Sarajevo Times*, June 29, 2024, <https://sarajevotimes.com/montenegro-adopted-the-resolution-on-genocide-in-jasenovac-dachau-and-mauthausen-camps/>.

¹³ Samir Kajosevic, “Croatia Bans Three Top Montenegrin Officials over Jasenovac Resolution,” *Balkan Insight*, July 25, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/25/croatia-bans-three-top-montenegrin-officials-over-jasenovac-resolution/>.

¹⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Jasenovac,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed February 11, 2026, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jasenovac>.