

Montenegro and its people now face a long and challenging road towards EU accession

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With the opening of EU accession negotiations, Montenegro is now the frontrunner of EU enlargement. [Jelena Dzankic](#) argues that the country faces many challenges before it can become an EU member, including boosting a flagging economy, tackling corruption and organized crime and the reform of the judiciary. But, she argues accession has also had some positive effects on the country's politics by inducing changes through greater consensus between the ruling coalition and opposition parties.



The last days of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU brought about the [start of accession negotiations with Montenegro](#), the smallest of the post-Yugoslav states. The process was officially launched on 29 June 2012, mere six years after the country opted for independence from the short-lived State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. With the opening of accession negotiations Montenegro became the forerunner among the Western Balkan states in the European Union (EU) enlargement process, with the exception of Croatia that is likely to become an EU Member State in 2013.

Montenegro's official plea for membership was submitted in Paris in December 2008, and the country was granted the candidate country status two years later. However, in its 2010 [Opinion on Montenegro's application for membership of the European Union](#), the European Commission (EC) refrained from stipulating the date for the opening of accession negotiations and laid out seven issues that the country was required to deal with before it could move another step closer to the EU. These issues included:

- improving the legislative framework for elections;
- public administration reform; strengthening the rule of law;
- tackling the issue of corruption;
- enhancing the fight against organized crime;
- strengthening media freedom; and
- implementing the legal and policy framework on anti-discrimination in accordance with international and European standards.

In December 2011, the EC established that Montenegro met the necessary benchmarks for opening the accession negotiations. [The Council](#), however, was not convinced, and as a prelude to its recent decision, it urged the country to improve the independence of its judiciary and strengthen the fight against corruption and organized crime. Both of the issues that the Council placed an emphasis on have been identified as long-standing issues in Montenegro's transition. These problems were generated through a combination of the legacies of the socialist system and the decade of conflicts in the post-Yugoslav space, which opened the doors for illicit activities throughout the region, including Montenegro. As a consequence of these concerns, chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom and security) of the EU's *acquis communautaire* (agreements to adopt and follow the EU's existing legislation and institutions) will be the first ones to be opened, and it is likely that their closure will approximate the end of accession negotiations.

In addition to these challenges, which appear as the primary concern in the context of Montenegro's accession, the tiny Balkan state will have to overcome a number of challenges in order to enhance its capacities to become a fully-fledged member of the EU. While the high degree of foreign direct investment (FDI) helped the country's euro-based economy to boom in the first years after independence, the financial

crisis had a profound effect on the financial sector. The sharp decrease in FDIs, coupled with companies with flagging business over the past three years, international borrowing to solve domestic issues in order to score short-term political points, and the public debt that has doubled since 2006 are all causes for concern. In late 2011, [international experts warned Montenegro](#) that it needs to curb borrowing and attract FDI, so as not to plunge into a scenario similar to the Greek one. In addition to the economic issues, political and societal realms are still deeply scarred by the division that peaked in the pre-referendum – the question of whether Montenegrins were a separate nation or a subgroup of Serbs. Although in Montenegro there has been no overt conflict as a result of this divide (and there is unlikely to be one), issues such as the national anthem, coat of arms, minority rights, etc. still feature as unresolved political matters.

Yet, while it is certain that the EU accession process will prove to be both a challenge and a deeply transformative process to Montenegro, the power of conditionality has already had positive effects in this small country. Montenegro is bound to comply with the accession requirements, and all of the political actors in this country are aware that the relationship with the EU is one of a large asymmetry. The understanding of this fact generates an interesting set of bargaining leverages among political actors, particular in those situations when a broad political consensus is required to comply with the accession requirements. In the case of Montenegro, this dynamic has been particularly manifest in the relationship between the government and the opposition on those issues where a simple majority was insufficient to bring about legal change.

The most vivid example of the understanding of this asymmetry is the political negotiation that preceded the adoption of the new Election Code in late 2011, stipulated as one of the conditions for opening the accession negotiations. Since any changes to the election legislation required a 2/3 majority approval in Parliament, the ruling coalition ceded certain concessions to the opposition parties, whose legislative proposals are seldom adopted. The package of reforms that the opposition required in order to agree on the new Election Code included minority representation in the Parliament and facilitated conditions for the acquisition of the Montenegrin citizenship for the people from the former Yugoslav republics, [as explained in my earlier EUDO blog](#). It is likely that such political bargaining, which shows the political polarization in Montenegro will continue in the course of the negotiations. Some aspects of the shifting leverages have already started to resonate, especially with regards to the requests of the parties representing the interests of the Serbs in Montenegro, who condition reforms with the [change of the symbols of the state](#).

Meanwhile, the Montenegrin people dream about the EU as the Promised Land, but [hardly grasp the degree of changes required in the light of accession and the costs that they are likely to incur](#). The people are far less aware than the country's politicians that knocking on Europe's door will require strength and commitment. And the reward for that is hope; hope that, by the time Montenegro is ready 'to join the club'; the EU will be willing and ready to absorb a young, small Western Balkan state.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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