

30 in 2030?: Making Montenegro's EU Accession a Success Story

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Montenegro is a test case for the EU's ability to engage with the enlargement process in a different way within the framework of the current methodology and to demonstrate actual – not just rhetorical – commitment to the policy. Allowing Podgorica to join already, during the current politico-institutional cycle, could serve to restore the credibility of the membership perspective offered to the Balkans, further motivate reform in Ukraine and Moldova and prove that the EU is capable of responding effectively to the tectonic geopolitical shifts triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine.

If Montenegro were to join the EU in the next few years, it would set a precedent for any potential entries thereafter, as well as for the future of enlargement policy. The EU should therefore make sure that Montenegro's accession is a real success story for the EU, for the new member and for the enlargement dossier as a whole. To plan for such a win-win outcome, the EU and its members should properly prepare Montenegro's accession with clear and detailed plans, which outline the steps to be taken both by Montenegro and the EU in the near future. Foreseeing a more active and substantive role for civil society involvement will be key to ensure that the process is transformative.

BREAKING THE IMPASSE: RECONCILING GEOPOLITICS AND MERITS

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine clearly showed how geopolitically imperative it is to expand the EU. Both the European Council and the Commission declared their renewed commitment to enlargement and recognised how urgent it is to expand the EU. The Commissioner for Enlargement [Marta Kos recently announced](#) that two accessions are envisioned before the end of her current mandate in 2029.

This geopolitical imperative has to be reconciled with the need to ensure that any aspiring new member fulfils the existing conditions, a circle that has proven difficult to square. On the one hand, after two decades of protracted

European integration, the EU membership offer is too short on credibility – especially in the Western Balkans – to be able to incentivise the quick implementation of accession-related reforms in the candidate countries. On the other hand, member states do not see eye to eye on how to advance the policy in practice.

So far, there is little detail on how the geopolitical imperative for expansion and the merit-based approach can be reconciled in practice. To break this geostrategic impasse and make the enlargement of the EU towards the Balkans and the east a reality, the EU and its member states should commit to seeing at least one country join the EU during the ongoing politico-institutional cycle.

EU28 BY 2028?

Montenegro is best placed to become the next member of the EU. It is the most advanced candidate in the negotiating process, having closed six of the 33 chapters of the *acquis*. On 27 June 2025, Podgorica held its eighteenth Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) at the Ministerial level and closed chapter 5 on Public Procurement – the first of the Cluster 1 on Fundamentals. This is a significant milestone given that the fundamentals are the cornerstone of the accession process and progress on that cluster determines the overall pace of negotiations. Since taking office in October 2023, the Montenegrin government announced its intention to conclude accession negotiations by 2026 and become the 28th EU member by 2028.

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Driven by this ambition, which coincides with the EU's own renewed interest in enlargement, Montenegro resumed its accession negotiations with the EU in 2024 and went through three Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs) after many years of stalemate. In June last year, Montenegro became the first candidate to receive a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR), which paved the way for the closure of three chapters in December – the first in seven years.

Montenegro's determination has been welcomed and supported by the [European Commission](#), which deemed Podgorica's self-imposed accession timeline realistic. The [Council](#) also encouraged Montenegro to pursue its plan and committed to start drafting the accession treaty if the country keeps the good pace of progress towards delivering the required reforms.

These signs of mutual commitment offer reasons for optimism, but Montenegro's accession requires the EU to walk the enlargement talk and properly prepare each step of the way.

TRANSLATING THE RHETORICAL COMMITMENT INTO PRACTICE

Montenegro is a test case for the EU's ability to engage with the enlargement process in a different way and to demonstrate actual – not just rhetorical – commitment to the policy. This does not mean amending the current methodology but mobilising the political will to deliver with the tools provided by the existing strategy. The EU27 must give better consistency to the 'fair' element of the 'strict and fair' mantra, investing political capital in the complex technical accession process laid out and making sure that the policy delivers not only promised rewards but also new members. Doing so will likely inspire candidates to do their part and the success of each accession country will motivate the next one in line.

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To demonstrate commitment to the policy, the EU and its members have to start looking at the policy as being in their own interest – as opposed to something that the EU *has to do*. This requires rhetorical adjustment, reframing the narrative on enlargement to convey the importance of the dossier in allowing the EU to secure

peace, prosperity and democracy through deepening and widening. From this new perspective, the benefits of membership become the fruits of cooperation between existing and new members, rather than the prize of accession. Consequently, responsibility for the success of the policy is shared as well, between the EU countries and the candidates.

All this does not preclude that Podgorica's accession should be carefully prepared, as it is to set a good precedent for subsequent entries and for the future of enlargement policy.

PREPARATIONS FOR MONTENEGRO'S EU ACCESSION

Preparations for Podgorica's accession should start with the drafting of an **Accession Roadmap**, detailing a timeline, milestones and deadlines to be met before the country can join the EU. The document should also identify the areas where derogations and transition periods will be needed and should include a **Post-Accession Reform Plan** as well, in case the implementation of certain reforms will need to happen only after Montenegro's entry.

The EU and Montenegro should jointly agree on these plans and commitments. The involvement of civil society in the drafting and implementation phases of these documents will be crucial to preserve the transformative character of the policy. A bottom-up process will also be key to ensure that the needs and interests of different stakeholders are considered, that there is popular buy-in for reforms and decisions and that citizens can act as watchdogs in holding their governments to account.

The Commission should consider Civil Society Organisation (CSO) feedback when monitoring the process and the quality of the reforms. It should also encourage Directorate-Generals (DGs) working on specific policy and developmental aspects of the negotiations (e.g. agriculture, fisheries, cohesion and the circular economy) to strengthen their links with civic actors that focus on these topics.

The Accession Roadmap and the Post-Accession Reform Plan should aim to balance conditions with speed. The two should also be embedded into a broader and ambitious [Enlargement Roadmap](#), which specifies the next steps in the policy, making sure that enlargement continues after Montenegro joins. Being clear, concrete and transparent about the future of enlargement will allow the EU to dispel critical perceptions that Podgorica's entry is being used as a fig leaf to hide member states' lack of appetite for further widening. An Enlargement Roadmap could thus be an opportunity for the member states to demonstrate that Montenegro is but a stepping stone towards the gradual and strategic completion of enlargement.

The Enlargement Roadmap should further be intertwined with a **Comprehensive EU Reform Plan** outlining when, how and to what extent the enlarging EU should reform its operating system in the coming years.

Both the [European Council](#) and the [European Commission](#) have linked the processes of enlargement and internal reform, stressing that the two must advance hand in hand. However, the EU27 have not yet reached consensus on the precise reforms needed. As such, they seem to express political support for enlargement while keeping the option of stopping the process by pointing to a lack of progress on internal reform. While Montenegro's accession will not require internal EU reform, linking both processes would help to cement aspirants' trust that the EU and its members are serious about the membership offer. It would also ease concerns on the side of those member states that believe that the EU is not ready to open its doors to new members.

If Podgorica were to join the Union in the current politico-institutional cycle, it would send an unequivocal signal that the membership offer is real and that candidates who meet the accession criteria can make it into the EU. This would incentivise aspiring EU members to step up their reform efforts and ultimately allow the EU to reconcile the geopolitical imperative for enlargement with a rigorous, merit-based process.

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