



Skupština Crne Gore

***EU–MONTENEGRO
STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE (SAPC)***

**MINUTES FROM THE
19th Meeting
EU–Montenegro
Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC)**

Interactio, 3 June 2021 13:00-15:30

The meeting began on 3 June, at 13:11h.

SAPC Co-Chair Vladimír BILČÍK inaugurated the meeting and welcomed the newly formed delegation from Montenegro. In the beginning of the meeting he announced that the two Co-Chairs had agreed not to adopt joint recommendations this time due to the restrictions imposed by the online format and the absence of an official online voting procedure in place for delegations. He also expressed hope that recommendations could be adopted at the next SAPC meeting in Strasbourg.

Mr BILČÍK went on to praise the peaceful and orderly transition of power, and the new Government's continued EU commitment and declared Euro-Atlantic orientation. Furthermore, he mentioned the recent EP report on Montenegro, which reaffirms the EP's strong support of the country's EU accession, and the revised methodology, which will give an impetus to the enlargement process. Montenegro remains a frontrunner, but so far only three chapters have been closed and reforms need to accelerate. He expressed hope for a speedy appointment of heads of working groups for interim benchmark chapters 23 and 24, as well as enhanced regional cooperation and improved neighbourly relations (particularly with Serbia), which is essential for the enlargement process.

Despite a number of positive developments, including in the areas of the fight against high-level corruption and organized crime, increased transparency and accountability of the parliament, and legislative readjustments ensuing international/EU criticism, he expressed concern over several issues - namely, the hasty decisions related to the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Law on State Prosecution, the challenging cohabitation situation between the President and the new government, and a number of outstanding rule-of-law challenges. He said that without resolving the issues that require two-thirds or three-fifths support in the Parliament, fundamental progress on Montenegro's EU perspective would be difficult. The situation on media freedom - Montenegro being the lowest ranking country in the Western Balkans -, according to the World Press Freedom Index, 2021), and reform of the judiciary were particularly challenging. Mr BILČÍK stressed that the Venice Commission's opinions should

be followed up in a comprehensive way, and that a fully functioning parliament was essential for Montenegro's EU path, referring to the recently announced boycott by the largest opposition party DPS and calling on its members to take up seats in the Parliament

SAPC Co-Chair and Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro Aleksa BEČIĆ presented the recent changes in the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament of Montenegro aiming at increasing the supervisory role of the Skupština as well as changes in the Montenegrin political structure, stressing the strengthened parliamentary control of the government composed of non-partisan experts. He regretted the boycott by the DPS and the subsequent delay in the work of the Parliamentary Committee for Comprehensive Electoral Reform, and informed about his plans to launch a dialogue between parliamentary parties in the second half of June in order to find a solution to all appointments related to the judiciary. He reminded that the new government was committed to truly accelerating Montenegro's European and Euro-Atlantic path, a commitment that the EU mirrors, as enlargement policy remains high on the EU agenda. He thus welcomed the European Commission's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which he views as an incentive for both the authorities and the citizens in the region.

Furthermore, he underlined the importance of focusing on chapters 23 and 24, which is needed in order to close other chapters and speed up the accession process. The new government is committed to achieve results in these areas, after a period of "stagnation". Regarding regional cooperation, Mr Bečić was of the opinion that joint assistance in the integration process was vital, and that a failure to cooperate would be mutually detrimental. He argued that there were no alternative accession paths, and that building bridges in the Western Balkans was an essential element of the enlargement process.

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The agenda was adopted as in the draft document.

2. State of play of the accession negotiations and EU-Montenegro relations, including the Covid-19 situation and its consequences in the presence of Ms Zorka KORDIĆ, Chief Negotiator for Montenegro's Accession to the European Union on behalf of the Government of Montenegro, Ms Virginia PINA, Ambassador of Portugal to Montenegro on behalf of the Portuguese Presidency-in-Office of the Council of the EU, Ms Michela MATUELLA, Acting Director in the DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations on behalf of the European Commission and Ms Elsa FENET, Head of Division 'Western Balkans' in the European External Action Service

Ms Zorka KORDIĆ, Chief Negotiator for Montenegro's Accession to the European Union on behalf of **the Government of Montenegro**, reminded of Montenegro's continued commitment to EU membership (the country's main foreign policy objective), which corresponds to the expectations of 75% of the citizens. She stressed that Montenegro was the only candidate country which opened all negotiating chapters and had a 100% CFSP alignment. Furthermore, she maintained the view that the new methodology, accepted by Montenegro in May 2020, would provide a stronger political dimension to the enlargement, and that the EU accession process would bring about the culture of compromise and inclusive dialogue which would in turn strengthen the judiciary. Zero tolerance of corruption and strong fight against organized crime are the government's objectives in the area of rule-of-law. With regard to the pandemic,

she praised the EU's Covid-19 response and assistance to Montenegro (including the redesigned IPA funds, which will be needed for the country's recovery) and communicated her government's wish to be part of the EU's Covid-19-related green certificate programme. She also informed participants about the fact that, so far, 25% of the population had been vaccinated.

Ms Virginia PINA, Ambassador of Portugal to Montenegro on behalf of **the Portuguese Presidency**, said that the role of the SAPC was important for advancing Montenegro's EU accession, as it focused on the functioning of democratic institutions, the electoral environment and inter-party dialogue. She expressed concern over the recent announcement by the opposition to boycott parliamentary sessions, and called for intensified efforts to reach consensus and to further enhance the role of CSOs in the political dialogue. Furthermore, she said that enlargement remains the Portuguese Presidency's strategic objective as a means to achieve peace, security and prosperity in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, whereby Montenegro's strong and active regional cooperation and full CSFP alignment was well received. She informed that on 6 May, the Council accommodated the revised methodology also to Montenegro's existing negotiating framework, and stressed that renewed commitment and vigorous reforms in rule-of-law, particularly in media freedom, judiciary reform and fight against corruption and organized crime would determine the accession process. A first Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) under the new enlargement methodology will be organized with Montenegro on 22 June.

Ms Michela MATUELLA, Acting Director in the DG NEAR on behalf of **the European Commission** also pointed out the regrettable political tensions and boycotts, which characterized the post-electoral period. Political dialogue is essential to accelerate Montenegro's EU path and fulfil the commitments made to the citizens. She reminded that a sufficient majority for all pending appointments in the judiciary could only be ensured through political dialogue, and that legislative changes would need to be prepared in line with European standards and best practices, following a broad and inclusive consultation process. Furthermore, she informed that changes in the civil service were of concern as a substantial amount of EU expertise had been lost, and that the EU was ready to provide advice and support. She welcomed the country's Euro-Atlantic strategic direction and reminded that Montenegro had opened 33 chapters, with closing benchmarks set in all but chapters 23 (on judicial reform and fundamental rights) and chapter 24 (on justice freedom and security). The next milestone is meeting the rule of law interim benchmarks and bridging the outstanding gaps rather than addressing new issues. In conclusion, she commented on the EU's efforts to support the country's economic recovery from the pandemic, mentioning the IPA instrument, macro-financial assistance, solidarity funds and COVAX.

Ms Elsa FENET, Head of Division 'Western Balkans' in the **European External Action Service** also praised Montenegro's confirmed EU-strategic direction and determination to uphold EU values, of which the country's 100% CFSP alignment since 2021 was a clear and symbolic sign. She welcomed Montenegro's contribution to EU missions and operations (e.g.: in Mali and Somalia), which is a preparatory step towards becoming a fully-fledged EU member state. She informed participants that Montenegro had a strong record of contributing to positive regional relations and stability, and encouraged all political forces to work on maintaining this positive record. Furthermore, she said that the EU was looking forward to the long-awaited appointment of Montenegro's EU Ambassador as a trusted interlocutor, and that a well-functioning diplomatic service was of essence. Regarding the domestic situation, Ms Fenet underlined that EU accession should be a matter of national consensus and that "EU reforms should not become victims of difficult political relationships". She added that constructive cohabitation was key to ensure quality legislation, and said that Montenegro needed to start

using the tools and recommendations from the EU institutions and the Venice Commission to fully implement reforms.

Branko RADULOVIĆ (Democratic Front - Movement for Changes) from the parliamentary majority drew attention to the economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis: Montenegro suffered the highest GDP drop (15.2%) in Europe with an unemployment over 20%. He stressed the need for Montenegro to intensify activities and achieve further results in rule-of-law, fight against organized crime and corruption, and in media freedom, in particular. In addition, he asked for further assistance from the EU through the investment framework for the Western Balkans.

Tomislav SOKOL (EPP, HR) pointed out the heterogeneous nature of the ruling coalition: pro-European versus pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces. He was wondering about the government's stability in light of the Democratic Forum's recently reiterated lack of support for PM Krivokapić. He also enquired about the recent media reports in Croatia, regarding Montenegro's plans to withdraw its military attaché in Zagreb, and what the implications of this decision might be for the country's NATO membership and its good neighbourly relations with Croatia.

Boris MUGOŠA (Social Democrats of Montenegro - opposition) lamented about the still pending appointments of the heads of the most important working groups for the key chapters 23 and 24, and those of ambassadors to the EU and the Council of Europe. He accused the parliamentary majority of not being engaged in dialogue on key appointments and reproached them for the lack of consultations. He also criticised the fact that 6 months after the new government had been sworn in, a budget had still not been adopted.

Hildegard BENTELE (EPP, DE) discussed the issue of foreign interference, and asked about the measures to ensure protection against external influence. She also enquired about the planned population census, why it was needed, and how to prevent it from becoming a political instrument.

Paulo RANGEL (EPP, PT) raised a question concerning the Law on Freedom of Religion and argued that freedom of religion was as important as freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and that without it there was no true democracy or rule of law. Furthermore, he asked about the parliament's position regarding the "non-paper" issue, and called on everyone to condemn these papers, which were an attempt to destabilise the process of EU accession. He concluded by praising Co-chair Bečić's commitment to the European project, as well as his efforts and neutrality as a speaker, which was beneficial for the democracy of the country and the cooperation between different political forces.

Simonida KORDIĆ (Democratic Front - Movement for Changes) regretted the statement made earlier by Mr Sokol regarding the government's split geostrategic orientation, and asked the European partners to do away with DPS' political narrative labelling them anti-European. She stressed that the parliamentary majority was unanimously and fully committed to the European cause. Furthermore, she underlined the importance of the accession process in harmonising economic practices and legislation, in order to stabilise migration policy and avoid an exodus of labour force from Montenegro to the EU.

Predrag BULATOVIĆ (Democratic Front) affirmed his party's European commitment, while also underscoring the necessity of maintaining good relations with Russia and Serbia. He emphasized the importance of not only Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood but also strong economic ties arguing that sanctions against Russia would have a negative effect on Montenegro's tourist industry. With this in mind, he asked the EU to be more flexible and

understanding of the specific and delicate situation. Regarding the pandemic, he regretted the country's delayed vaccination process and acknowledged the helpful donations from Russia and China.

3. Progress in rule of law, including media freedom, judiciary reform and the fight against organised crime and corruption

Andrija NIKOLIĆ (DPS and the Liberal Party) rebuked the current ruling coalition for not focusing enough on post-pandemic economic recovery, pursuing revanchist policies in employment in the state administration and restoring nationalistic ideas, thus detaching Montenegro from EU values. He urged the EU to be more active and to reiterate its commitment to the country's accession process, and to set clearer deadlines. He also accused the ruling parties of using judiciary reform to establish political influence in prosecution, in order to create political indictments and reduce DPS' electoral support.

Thomas WAITZ (Greens, AT) recalled that some of the accusations coming now from DPS match the ones that had been coming earlier from the then opposition. He also reminded DPS of their duty to honour the mandate they received from their voters and called on them to participate in the decision-making process in the Parliament. Furthermore, he commended the recent withdrawal of judges due to conflict of interest and pointed to first positive results in prominent cases of organized crime, which would restore the citizen's trust in the judicial system. He expressed hope that President Đukanović would sign the re-adopted amendments to the Law on State Prosecution, but regretted that not all of the Venice Commission's recommendations had been included in the Law. He concluded by expressing his support for the "regatta principle" - that the country that meets the requirements first should be able to join the EU, without having to wait for other candidate states to achieve the same level of progress.

Slaven RADUNOVIĆ (Democratic Front) explained President Đukanović's resistance against signing the amendments to the Law on State Prosecution by the fact that the Special Prosecutor's Office had been previously covering up for organized crime cases (e.g.: 'Envelope affair'), involving persons linked to the DPS.

Petra KAMMEREVERT (S&D, DE) drew attention to the situation regarding media freedom, an area where no progress had been made for five consecutive years, and stressed the importance of creating an enabling environment for journalists. The adoption of the new media law is a good first step in that regard, but national media should be able to report independently while perpetrators of attacks on journalists should be identified without any further delay. In addition, she expressed her wish to see an independent media supervisory authority, and for the Audio-visual Directive to be implemented without further delay.

Božena JELUSIĆ (URA) challenged the opposition with regard to the poor performance of the previous Prosecution Office as well as the slow harmonisation process with EU standards, and expressed concern over media outlet ownership relations and disinformation practices.

In the debate that followed, further political arguments were exchanged between MPs of the ruling parties and the opposition. Speaker Bečić concluded by emphasising that dynamic discussions were the only way forward, and by admitting that continuous local elections were significantly harming the regular political dialogue, as parties were more concerned with their political positioning.

4. Any other business

There was no other business.

5. Date and place of the next SAPC meeting

The next SAPC meeting is tentatively scheduled for the 15-16 December 2021 in Strasbourg, if the epidemiological situation allows. The Secretariats of both delegations will inform Members in due time.

The meeting started at 13 h and 11 minutes and ended at 15 h and 37 minutes.

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These minutes were drafted by the European Parliament's Secretariat to the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee.