



**D-ME\_PV(2021)1118\_0**

# MINUTES

**of the meeting of 18 November 2021, 13.00-14.30**

**Room ANTALL 6Q1**

The meeting opened at 13.00 on Thursday, 18 November 2021, with Vladimír BILČÍK (Chair) presiding.

## **1. Adoption of draft agenda**

The Agenda was adopted without any changes.

## **2. Adoption of the draft minutes of the meeting of the EU-Montenegro Delegation of 22 April 2021**

The draft minutes were adopted as in the draft

## **3. Chair's announcements**

After welcoming the newly designated Ambassador and Head of Mission of Montenegro to the European Union Mr Petar Marković, D-ME Chair Mr Vladimír BILČÍK announced that the next SAPC meeting, scheduled for 2 December 2021, was very topical because it would be one year that Montenegro's new Government would have been in office, and it would be a good opportunity to assess what had been achieved so far and what needed to be done still to accelerate progress on Montenegro's EU path. He regretted that in the recent period internal political divisions had further deepened at all levels, namely between the ruling majority and the opposition, within the ruling coalition, between the executive and legislative powers and between the President and the ruling majority. This slowed down progress in key areas of reform such as

the electoral and the judicial ones.

Mr BILČÍK went on to say that the recurring boycotts had left the Parliament with little to show this year, and the deep political polarization in the country had culminated in two troubling events, namely the dismissal of the Minister of Justice Leposavić after his controversial statements on the Srebrenica genocide in June, and the enthronement of the new Serbian Orthodox Metropolitan in Cetinje in September. He expressed his concern over the fate of the current Government that could face a reshuffle along party lines or fall, and new snap elections would be called.

Mr BILČÍK recalled that the latest EP resolution on Montenegro of May and the EC report of October both stressed the need to forge an overall cross-party and societal consensus to reflect the citizens' highly positive attitude towards Montenegro's EU accession. Rule of law and fundamental rights, the judiciary, media freedom and the fight against corruption remain the key areas to tackle in order to progress on the EU reform agenda. He welcomed the recently held first ever Citizens Assembly in the Western Balkans on 4 November, in cooperation with the Parliament of Montenegro, when a group of randomly selected Montenegrin citizens had approved a set of recommendations aiming at tackling corruption in the fields of public administration and the health sector. He reiterated that the European Parliament remained committed to supporting democracy in the country and would monitor the implementation of the recommendations by the authorities.

**4. Exchange of views on the political, economic and pandemic situation in Montenegro in the presence of Mr Petar MARKOVIĆ, Ambassador-Designate, Head of Mission of Montenegro to the European Union; Ms Barbara JESUS-GIMENO, Deputy Head of the Montenegro and Serbia Unit in the DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations of European Commission; Ms Elsa FENET, Head of Division 'South-East Europe & Western Balkans' in the European External Action.**

Mr MARKOVIĆ opened his statement by assuring participants that his arrival in Brussels signaled a positive step forward in the political dialogue in Montenegro, since an agreement between the President and the Government had been needed to nominate and appoint an Ambassador. He expressed his satisfaction that the first ever Citizens Assembly had been held in Montenegro with Mr Bilčík's participation, paving a strong way forward in reaching broader social consensus on key topics for Montenegro's political stability and democratic accountability.

He assured participants about the fact that the cabinets of the two Presidents and that of the Prime Minister were communicating regularly, working together on common issues, and that, when issues of great interest for the society were concerned, the Skupština was able to be fully operational. He voiced hope that this tendency would speed up and that it would end the current legislative blockade, as well as the current disagreements between and within parties. In that case some appointments in the rule of law area could already be expected by the end of 2021.

As for the economic situation, he informed that ten months after the new Government had entered office, Montenegro managed to improve its economic indicators. In December 2020, real GDP growth was -15%, while now it is expected to reach 11-13% by the end of 2021. The budget deficit of almost 11% from last year is now down to 3%, and the Government debt which was close to 100%, is expected to get down to 76% by the end of this year. The tourist season was much better compared to the previous one, allowing the Government prepare the budget for 2022, considered far more comprehensive than those from previous years. A package of economic

reforms called “Europe Now” is now in front of the Parliament. Some of its aims include the doubling of the minimum wage while being completely fiscal neutral for the economy.

As for the pandemic recovery, he informed participants that Montenegro was facing a fourth wave, with contagion rates rising, but the Government had already adopted a number of measures in view of the upcoming holiday season, which include the curtailing of celebrations in public and the expansion of the national digital COVID-certificate. Authorities are also monitoring and considering other measures that had been implemented by some EU member states. When asked by D-ME Chair how and when Montenegro would overcome the current political crisis, he replied by saying that it was “a million dollar question”, and hoped that a solution would be found soon. When asked about Montenegro’s fiscal stability, he assured participants that the country had achieved lasting stability, and that the ponderous Chinese loan had been converted from dollars to euros, resulting in much less pressure on the budget.

Ms Barbara JESUS-GIMENO from DG NEAR reminded that there was a very high support among citizens for Montenegro’s EU membership, and the authorities mirrored that sentiment and committed on delivering in that regard. This translated in the country’s full alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. However, according to the last EC report, the overall pace of reform implementation slowed down considerably. She informed participants that the country was still in a challenging political situation, where religion and ethnicity had so far dominated the public discourse. Political polarization intensified and parliamentary boycotts became the norm. With 33 negotiation chapters opened and 3 provisionally closed, Montenegro is the most advanced country in the accession process. However, more is expected to move forward on its EU path, in particular in the rule of law area, where meeting the interim benchmarks of chapters 23 and 24 is paramount. She underlined that no other chapters would be opened before this milestone is reached.

Ms JESUS-GIMENO urged Montenegro to swiftly tackle the lack of political dialogue especially in Parliament, where 60 laws were waiting to be processed, and the lack of a qualified majority to appoint pending key judicial positions, in particular the President of the Supreme Court, the Supreme State Prosecutor, members of Judicial councils and judges. She flagged the loss of expertise needed to deal with EU related reforms after the reorganization of the public administration and she urged the authorities to work on the de-politicization of the public service. She reminded about President Von der Leyen’s visit to the Montenegro and the Western Balkans ahead of the Brdo Summit that unequivocally confirmed EU’s support to the region and its EU perspective.

Ms JESUS-GIMENO reminded participants about the fact that the Union had mobilized a 3.3 billion of euros package for the pandemic relief in the region, of which 1 million had been allocated to Montenegro, together with vaccines, medical equipment and help to meet the technical criteria for the EU COVID digital certificates. Up to 30 billion of euros of funds were allocated in areas such as sustainable transport, energy, environment, and digital and human capital. The economy recovered strongly in 2021, due to the rebounding tourism that had been supported by targeted Government measures. She voiced hoped that the sustainability of public finances would remain high on the agenda and result in balanced fiscal and debt strategies. In conclusion, she stressed that political stability and consensus were essential for Montenegro to move forward on its EU path. The Commission will continue to provide its support on technical and political levels, with a clear message that shortcuts are not possible, expecting more rigorous reforms especially in the rule of law area.

Ms Elsa FENET from the EEAS focused on the state of play of Montenegro's engagement outside its national borders. She recalled the declaration made by the coalition parties that formed the new Government back in August 2020 to maintain Montenegro's euro-Atlantic orientation. She pointed out some positive practices, such as maintenance of the 100% alignment with the Union's common foreign and security policy, participation in EU missions and operations, and continued cooperative engagement in the regional development. She reminded that the latest EC report had pointed out that this euro-Atlantic orientation needed to translate also in terms of internal EU-related reforms.

Ms FENET regretted the lack of progress in that regard due to political divisions that had impacted the good functioning of the Parliament. She reminded that the EU did not support boycotts and blockages of state institutions, and encouraged instead all state actors to work together and overcome these deep divisions. She recalled that during the last IGC held in June, the High Representative Mr Borrell made it clear that, with the adoption of the new methodology, progress on fundamentals would be paramount. Without progress in this area, no other chapters could be opened. She commended Montenegro's positive engagement in the region, in particular the participation of its Foreign Minister at the Conference of Europe, but warned about the destabilizing effects of some neighbouring countries especially in the area of media.

#### **5. Consideration of the draft agenda of the 20th EU-Montenegro SAPC meeting due to be held on 2 December 2021 in Brussels**

D-ME Chair Mr Vladimír BILČÍK informed participants that the draft agenda had been pre-approved by him and co-chairperson Parliamentary Speaker Bečić and it was circulated on Monday 25 October, jointly with a call for first speakers. As for the Recommendations, he informed participants that the two Co-Chairs had negotiated a first draft of a compromise text, which had been launched for amendments on 12 November and that the vote on the whole text as amended would take place during the 20th EU-Montenegro SAPC meeting.

#### **6. Any other business**

No further issues were raised.

#### **7. Date and place of the next meeting**

D-ME Chair Mr Vladimír BILČÍK informed the Members connected that the 20th EU-Montenegro SAPC meeting would take place in Brussels and remotely on 2 December.

The meeting closed at 14.30.

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209 (7)
216 (3)
56 (8) (Точка от дневния ред/Punto del orden del día/Bod pořadu jednání (OJ)/Punkt på dagsordenen/Tagesordnungspunkt/ Päevakorra punkt/Σημείο της ημερήσιας διάταξης/Agenda item/Point OJ/Τοčka dnevnoĝ reda/Punto all'ordine del giorno/Darba kārtības punkts/Darbotvarkės punktas/Napirendi pont/Punt Agenda/Agendapunt/Punkt porządku dziennego/Ponto OD/Punct de pe ordinea de zi/Bod programu schôdze/Τοčka UL/Esityslistan kohta/Punkt på föredragningslistan)
H.E. Petar Marković - Ambassador and Head of Mission of Montenegro to the European Union
p.3, 4



Други учасници/Otros participantes/Ostatní účastníci/Endvidere deltog/Andere Teilnehmer/Muud osalejad/Επίσης παρόντες/Other participants/Autres participants/Drugi sudionici/Altri partecipanti/Citi klātesošie/Kiti dalyviai/Más résztvevők/Partecipanti ohra/Andere aanwezigen/Inni uczestnicy/Outros participantes/Alți participanți/Ini účastníci/Drugi udeleženci/Muut osallistujat/Övriga deltagare

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Peter Lang	
Сътрудник/Asistente/Asistent/Assistent/Assistenz/Βοηθός/Assistant/Assistente/Palīgs/Padējējas/Asszisztens/Asystent/Pomočnik/ Avustaja/Assistenten	
Vesselina Veleva	

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