

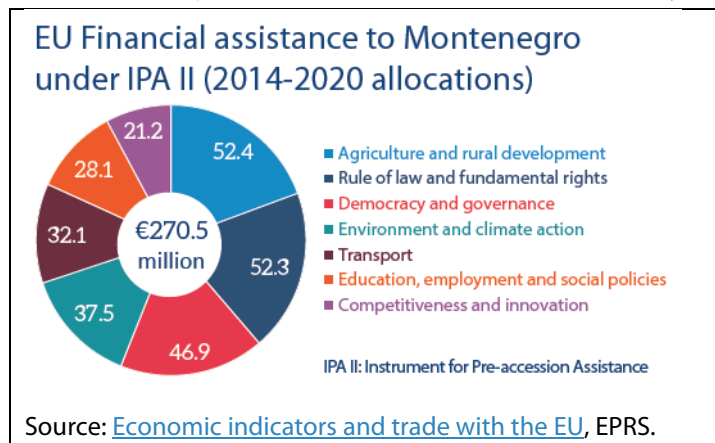
Montenegro – a lead candidate for EU accession

With most negotiation chapters open and a likely candidate to meet the 2025 accession date suggested by the European Commission's new 2018 enlargement strategy, Montenegro is in a leading position on its path towards EU accession, compared to the other five aspirants from the Western Balkans. In June 2017, the country also joined NATO, achieving another strategic foreign policy priority. Despite these favourable developments, Montenegro has a lot of work ahead in order to reach EU standards in areas such as the fight against corruption and organised crime, respect for the rule of law, and media freedom.

Relations with the European Union

Montenegro applied for EU membership in December 2008, and its Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the legal foundation for relations with the EU, entered in force in 2010.

In 2012, Montenegro became the first country from the six current Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for EU membership to start accession negotiations with the EU. At present, it has opened 31 of a total of 35 negotiation chapters, and has provisionally closed three. The government has expressed hope



that two more chapters could be opened by the end of 2018. In September 2018, its Chief Negotiator underlined Montenegro's commitment to meeting [closing benchmarks](#) for several chapters. Technically speaking, therefore, Montenegro has the lead in its relations with the EU, followed by Serbia, the only other country from the region with ongoing accession negotiations (since 2015). The EU is also Montenegro's [biggest trading partner](#), as well as the largest provider of financial assistance under its Instrument for pre-accession assistance (figure 1).

February enlargement strategy

In February 2018, the European Commission published a [new enlargement strategy](#), offering a credible enlargement perspective to the six Western Balkan countries, as well as enhanced EU engagement with the region. Importantly, it indicated 2025 as a possible enlargement date, while at the same time making it clear that this remains an opportunity which can only become reality if the countries embark on long-pending and difficult reforms, and solve all outstanding bilateral disputes. Montenegro, well ahead in the EU accession process, and with no major bilateral issues with its neighbours, has [welcomed](#) the strategy and its encouraging message.

Although EU Member States hold [diverging positions](#) regarding the possible timing of future enlargement, Montenegro can facilitate its own progress by remaining committed to delivering results on key reforms, such as the rule of law and the fight against corruption, as highlighted in the latest European Commission report of April 2018.

European Commission's 2018 report on Montenegro

In April 2018, the European Commission published its latest package of reports on the enlargement countries. The [report](#) on Montenegro highlights its continuous progress with reforms and welcomes the country's constructive role in regional cooperation, its further alignment with and preparation for implementing the EU *acquis*. Progress in the area of public administration reform and fundamental rights, as well as the strengthened institutional capacity of the judicial system are other welcome developments.

Montenegro is also assessed as being moderately prepared in developing a functioning market economy. However, challenges such as the high public debt, negative impact on the business environment (due to rule of law weaknesses and unfair competition from the informal economy, to name a few), persist.

At the same time, many concerns remain in areas such as the fight against corruption and organised crime. Corruption is still seen as prevalent in many areas and a convincing track record, particularly in the fight against money laundering and trafficking in human beings, is lacking. The report urges the institutions to display a more proactive attitude in this respect.

On freedom of expression, the report notes no progress; to the contrary, recent [political interference](#) in the operations of the national public broadcaster, as well as recent cases of [violence against journalists](#), have caused [serious concern](#). In June, following the dismissal of the Director General of Montenegro's national public broadcaster, the Commission stated that this type of action goes [against freedom of expression and the media](#), emphasising that this principle is a crucial element in Montenegro's EU accession process and an important interim benchmark to be fulfilled under chapter 23.

Assessing the political situation, the Commission notes the prolonged parliamentary boycott of the entire opposition since the October 2016 parliamentary [elections](#). The domestic political context in Montenegro has been turbulent in recent years, with anti-government protests in 2015, polarised elections in October 2016, and the ensuing longstanding opposition boycott. While most opposition parties have now returned to parliament, others have not yet done so. The 2018 report recalls that political dialogue and constructive engagement by all parties is required to enhance parliamentary accountability and oversight of the executive. In a [declaration](#) in July 2018, the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee reminded all political actors of the need to engage in a meaningful and inclusive political dialogue in the Parliament in order to fulfil their parliamentary duties towards voters and to strengthen parliamentary oversight of the executive. The EU also emphasises that the authorities must improve parliamentary legislative capacity, executive oversight and institutional transparency. The authorities are urged to de-politicise the public service and institute broad electoral reforms to eliminate irregularities.

NATO membership

On 3 June 2017, Montenegro joined NATO and became the Alliance's 29th member, a development that represents a major step forward on the country's pro-Western course. However, the [process of joining](#) the Alliance was not devoid of controversy. NATO membership has been at the centre of heated political debates in the country, which triggered anti-NATO protests. A weak point was the divided public opinion and Russia's attempts to sabotage the process, including through a [failed coup](#) in Montenegro during the October 2016 elections.

A year later, in June 2018, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg commended Montenegro for its contributions to European-Atlantic security, stating that the country had helped [promote stability](#) in the region.

European Parliament position

On 2 October 2018, the European Parliament will host Montenegro's recently elected President Milo Đukanović, who will [address the plenary](#). The presidential election took place in April 2018, and the EP's election observation delegation, headed by Fabio Massimo Castaldo (EFDD, Italy), [concluded](#) that fundamental freedoms has been respected in the election. Experts are [unsurprised](#) by Đukanović's victory, given that he and his Democratic party of Socialists have dominated Montenegro's political scene since the 1990s.

The EP's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), and the rapporteur on Montenegro Charles Tannock (ECR, United Kingdom) will draft an own-initiative report on the Commission's 2018 report, to be adopted in the coming months.

