



TEXTS ADOPTED

P9_TA(2021)0244

2019-2020 Reports on Montenegro

European Parliament resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Montenegro (2019/2173(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States of the one part, and the Republic of Montenegro, of the other part¹, which entered into force on 1 May 2010,
- having regard to Montenegro's application for membership of the European Union of 15 December 2008,
- having regard to the Commission opinion of 9 November 2010 on Montenegro's application for membership of the European Union (COM(2010)0670), the European Council's decision of 16-17 December 2010 to grant Montenegro candidate status and the European Council's decision of 29 June 2012 to open EU accession negotiations with Montenegro,
- having regard to Montenegro's accession to NATO on 5 June 2017,
- having regard to the Presidency conclusions of the Thessaloniki European Council meeting of 19-20 June 2003,
- having regard to the Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 17 May 2018 and the Sofia priority agenda annexed thereto,
- having regard to the Berlin Process launched on 28 August 2014,
- having regard to its resolution of 29 November 2018 on the 2018 Commission Report on Montenegro²,
- having regard to the declaration and recommendations adopted at the 18th meeting of the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), held in Podgorica on 25 and 26 February 2020,

¹ OJ L 108, 29.4.2010, p. 1.

² OJ C 363, 28.10.2020, p. 127.

- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 February 2020 entitled ‘Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0057),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 29 May 2019 entitled ‘2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy’ (COM(2019)0260), accompanied by the Commission staff working document entitled ‘Montenegro 2019 Report’ (SWD(2019)0217),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled ‘2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy’ (COM(2020)0660), accompanied by the Commission staff working document entitled ‘Montenegro 2020 Report’ (SWD(2020)0353),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled ‘An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0641),
- having regard to the joint communication of 8 April 2020 of the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy entitled ‘Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19’ (JOIN(2020)0011),
- having regard to the Commission assessment of 21 April 2020 of the Economic Reform Programme of Montenegro (2020-2022) (SWD(2020)0066) and to the joint conclusions of the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans and Turkey, adopted by the Council on 19 May 2020,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 29 April 2020 entitled ‘Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery’ (COM(2020)0315),
- having regard to the fifth meeting of the Accession Conference with Montenegro at deputy level of 30 June 2020 in Brussels, where negotiations on the last screened chapter, Chapter 8, ‘competition policy’ were opened,
- having regard to its previous resolutions on the country,
- having regard to the statement of preliminary findings and conclusions of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) international election observation mission to the parliamentary elections of 30 August 2020 in Montenegro, issued on 11 December 2020,
- having regard to its recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit¹,
- having regard to the joint declaration of the European Parliament-Western Balkans Speakers’ Summit of 28 January 2020, convened by the President of the European Parliament with the leaders of the Western Balkan parliaments,

¹ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0168.

- having regard to the Zagreb Declaration agreed during the EU-Western Balkans summit that took place via videoconference on 6 May 2020,
 - having regard to the EU-Western Balkans summits in the framework of the Berlin Process of 5 July 2019 in Poznań and of 10 November 2020 in Sofia,
 - having regard to the second country monitoring report on Montenegro (fifth monitoring cycle) of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance published in September 2017, and to the conclusions on Montenegro concerning the state of implementation of the 2017 recommendations, published in June 2020,
 - having regard to the Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process of 5 July 2019 and the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in Montenegro 2016-2020,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0131/2021),
- A. whereas each enlargement country is judged individually on its own merits, and it is the speed and quality of reforms that determine the timetable for accession;
 - B. whereas pursuant to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, any European country may apply to become a member of the Union provided that it adheres to all of the Copenhagen criteria, including respect for and protection of minorities;
 - C. whereas democracy and the rule of law are fundamental values on which the EU is founded and are at the heart of the enlargement and stabilisation and association processes; whereas reforms are needed to tackle the challenges that remain in these areas;
 - D. whereas Montenegro is currently the most advanced in its negotiation process, having opened all 33 screened chapters of the EU *acquis*, and has provisionally closed negotiations on three;
 - E. whereas Montenegro has continued to build a good track record in implementing the obligations of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement;
 - F. whereas the parliamentary elections of 30 August 2020 resulted in the first transition of power in a democratic setting in the country since the introduction of the multi-party system; whereas this transition was conducted in an orderly manner;
 - G. whereas the previous government acknowledged the election results and the transition of power, thus confirming the level of democratic maturity and progress achieved in Montenegro;
 - H. whereas the European Union is Montenegro's biggest trading partner, accounting for 37 % of total exports and 47 % of total imports of goods with a volume of trade amounting to EUR 1,38 billion in 2019;
 - I. whereas the EU is the largest provider of financial assistance to Montenegro and whereas Montenegro benefits from pre-accession assistance under the Instrument for

Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), with a total of EUR 504,9 million between 2007 and 2020;

- J. whereas the EU mobilised EUR 38 million in immediate support for the Western Balkans to tackle the health emergency caused by COVID-19;
- K. whereas the EU agreed on the reallocation of EUR 374 million from the IPA to help mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the Western Balkan region; whereas an amount of EUR 53 million was agreed between the Commission and Montenegro;
- L. whereas a macro-financial assistance package worth EUR 60 million was also offered to Montenegro and whereas EUR 804 million has been provided via European Investment Bank loans since 1999;
- M. whereas the Commission adopted a package of EUR 70 million under IPA II to help fund the access of Western Balkan countries to COVID-19 vaccines procured by EU Member States; whereas Montenegro signed an agreement in October 2020 under the COVAX initiative to receive 248 800 doses of these vaccines;
- N. whereas Roma and Egyptians have been particularly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic as they remain victims of deep-rooted prejudice in both social and professional settings;

Commitment to enlargement

1. Welcomes Montenegro's continued engagement in the EU integration process and its overall progress;
2. Stresses the importance of the swift implementation of the revised enlargement methodology based on thematic negotiation chapter clusters and the phasing-in of individual EU policies and programmes, in order to accelerate the overall negotiation process and provide clear and tangible incentives of direct interest to citizens of Montenegro;
3. Welcomes the opening of Chapter 8 (competition policy) and Montenegro's decision to accept the revised enlargement methodology; calls on Montenegro in particular to efficiently meet the interim benchmarks for Chapters 23 and 24, which will be the next milestone, and strongly supports the closing of accession chapters as Montenegro delivers and implements reforms on required benchmarks; recalls that three chapters have been provisionally closed since the opening of the first chapter in December 2012, and encourages Montenegro to place a clear focus on working to address the closing of benchmarks in all other chapters;
4. Welcomes the fact that the 30 August 2020 elections resulted in the first transition of power since the introduction of the multi-party system, in full respect of democratic standards and Montenegro's constitution, as well as the fact that the OSCE/ODIHR found the elections to have been conducted in an efficient, competitive and transparent manner; positively notes that the election results were not contested and that all elected parliamentarians have actually resumed their duties; expresses concern about the reports of external influence in the election process;

5. Welcomes the fact that on its first working day, the newly formed Montenegrin Government held an exchange of views with Members of the European Parliament and EU officials, as well as the new government's explicit commitment to further pursue EU integration, to meet the necessary standards for the country's progress on the EU path and to strengthen the transatlantic alliance;
6. Stresses that it is vital not to reverse earlier achievements in the reform process and encourages the new government to use its mandate to accelerate EU-related reforms and accession negotiations; notes that an open and constructive dialogue between all political and social stakeholders, as well as an agreement on key issues concerning the overall progress of the country are needed for Montenegro to make progress on the EU path;
7. Stresses the need for cooperative and constructive cohabitation between the president, the new government and the new parliament (*Skupština*), with a view to enhancing Montenegro's progress on its EU path and further strengthening the democratic progress of the country; calls on all parties to abide by democratic and constitutional principles;
8. Welcomes recent public opinion surveys, which show that an increasing number of Montenegrin citizens (76,6%) support the country's future membership of the EU, as a clear message to the new government that the people want reforms based on European values; notes that this is one of the highest rates of public support for the EU in the region; in this context, welcomes the fact that the Commission gave new impetus to enlargement in 2020 with a new strategy for the Western Balkans and the Economic and Investment Plan;
9. Commends Montenegro's progress in several areas of the accession negotiations, including international police cooperation and the fight against organised crime (including in establishing an initial track record in the areas of trafficking in human beings and drug smuggling); calls on the authorities to accelerate political and economic reforms, particularly on the rule of law and fundamental rights, the judiciary, media freedom and the fight against corruption, where further significant progress has to be made;
10. Calls for the active engagement and appropriate inclusion of the Western Balkan countries, including civil society and young people, in the Conference on the Future of Europe and for their contribution to be taken into account, given their commitment to become EU Member States in the future;
11. Calls for the creation of new opportunities for high-level political and policy dialogue with the Western Balkan countries, through regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministerial and parliamentary contacts, in order to strengthen the political credibility of the enlargement process and ensure stronger steering and high-level engagement, as also called for by the revised enlargement methodology;
12. Recalls that it is in the interests of the government to ensure adequate representation abroad; refers, in this regard, to the pending appointment of the Head of Montenegro's Mission to the EU;

Democracy and the rule of law

13. Takes note of the findings and conclusions of the international observers from the OSCE/ODIHR, and calls on the authorities to address their recommendations fully and in due time before the next national elections; welcomes the government's adoption of a decision on the establishment of the Council for the Control of the Electoral Roll; notes that the *Skupština* passed a decision on the establishment of the Committee for Comprehensive Electoral Reform in December 2020 and expects this committee to begin functioning without any further delay;
14. Encourages Montenegro to hold local elections simultaneously across the country in order to bring more stability to democracy, avoid constant campaigning and ease the tense political climate; expresses its disappointment that despite a cross-party agreement to hold local elections on the same day, the legal framework still does not address this issue sufficiently; recalls that a two-thirds majority is needed to amend the Law on the Election of Councillors and MPs, which requires a broad consensus of parliamentary parties;
15. Calls on all political forces in the newly elected *Skupština* to engage in a constructive, meaningful and inclusive dialogue in the parliament, as this is the key to successful parliamentary democracy; welcomes the decision of the opposition not to boycott the work of the *Skupština* and reiterates that a functioning parliamentary democracy is based on the participation of both the government and the opposition in the parliamentary decision-making process; underlines that broad consensus of both the ruling majority and the opposition is fundamental in moving forward on the EU accession path and on reforms; calls for measures aimed at improving dialogue and trust across the political spectrum;
16. Welcomes the recent appointments to Montenegro's Delegation to the EU-Montenegro SAPC and the completion of the Montenegro delegation to SAPC; calls for the resumption of the work of the SAPC as soon as possible and welcomes the remote SAPC meeting planned for June 2021; underlines the importance of parliamentary exchanges and the resumption of biannual meetings;
17. Welcomes the steps aimed at improving the supervisory role of the *Skupština* as well as its transparency and openness to citizens and civil society; calls for the newly elected *Skupština* to ensure inclusive political dialogue within parliament and for a stronger role for civil society;
18. Reiterates the importance of accelerating work on the implementation of the action plans for Chapters 23 and 24 and other strategic documents relating to the rule of law and fundamental rights, in particular through effective cross-party dialogue aimed at ensuring the required qualified majority for key judicial and prosecutorial appointments, and by conducting public and expert consultations on changes to key legislation; expresses concern that the working group on Chapter 24 has not met over the past year;
19. Is concerned about the recent developments as regards the Special Prosecutor for Organised Crime and Corruption as well as around the planned changes in the composition of the Prosecutorial Council; invites the Montenegrin Government to amend crucial pieces of legislation, including in the case of the proposed amendments to the Law on the Prosecutor's Office and the Law on the Special Prosecutor's Office in line with democratic norms and established European practice, and to follow up on the Venice Commission's opinion in this respect; emphasises that the independent

functioning and integrity of the Special Prosecutor's Office is key for Montenegro's progress in the area of the rule of law;

20. Regrets the limited progress in the judiciary, and calls on the Montenegrin authorities to urgently address the remaining challenges with regard to the independence, professionalism, efficiency and accountability of the judiciary through the implementation of existing legislation and in line with the recommendations made by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and the Venice Commission; stresses that Montenegro needs to make further progress on rule of law reforms, including by advancing and not reversing the implementation of the judicial reform in line with good democratic norms and practice; reiterates that as a result of reforms already carried out, Montenegro has the bodies and mechanisms in place to ensure judicial and prosecutorial independence and accountability; encourages the authorities to make consistent use of these mechanisms and to build on the work done to produce further results and improve the track record in the fight against corruption and organised crime;
21. Expresses deep concern over the Judicial Council's interpretation of the constitution, which condones the unlawful reappointment of court presidents for more than two terms; notes that the President of the Supreme Court and the presidents of the basic courts in Bar, Kotor and Plav resigned after the call for judges with multiple mandates to resign, thereby complying with good European practice and democratic standards;
22. Welcomes the fact that some progress has been made in the fight against organised crime, in particular as regards stronger capacity and professionalism of the police; encourages Montenegro to continue its efforts in this area, in particular through combating internationally operating criminal networks, with a particular focus on the fight against money laundering, human, drug and arms trafficking, illegal gambling and cigarette smuggling, and tracking their possible links to politicians and representatives of state institutions;
23. Commends the Deputy Prime Minister's recent success in arresting prominent figures involved in organised crime; strongly condemns the death threats made against him; calls for support and protection for all officials fighting corruption and organised crime even at a risk to their own lives and expresses its solidarity with them;
24. Underlines that systemic deficiencies in the criminal justice system remain and need to be addressed as a matter of priority; urges the authorities to put in place concrete measures to limit the use of plea bargains to exceptional cases in order to enhance the transparency and the credibility of the judicial response to organised crime;
25. Is seriously concerned about the limited progress in the fight against corruption, and calls on the institutions responsible to significantly improve the country's track record in the confiscation of criminal assets, prosecutions and final convictions, in particular in high-profile cases, by substantially improving the quality and independence of criminal investigation and law enforcement;
26. Notes some positive developments in the operations of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption; stresses however that challenges related to its independence and priority-setting still remain and calls on the agency to act independently and to consistently implement the Law on the Prevention of Corruption;

27. Reiterates the need for a robust criminal justice response to high-level corruption; recalls the need for an effective response to the alleged abuse of state resources for political parties and illegal financing of political parties;
28. Welcomes the efforts to implement public administration reform and the results already achieved; is concerned by the findings that party membership still strongly influences employment in the Montenegrin public sector and calls on the new government to avoid politically motivated dismissals and hiring of civil service professionals; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to continue their efforts to create an efficient public administration and to retain expertise, in particular on the EU accession process, and in that respect welcomes transparent appointment procedures; regrets that the institutional capacities of the competition and anti-corruption agencies remain weak;
29. Expresses concern over the amendments to the Law on Civil Servants and State Employees adopted in the *Skupština*, which lower the criteria for work in public administration and could undermine the progress made in public administration reform aiming to implement merit-based employment;
30. Welcomes the new government's promises to significantly increase transparency in all areas, including public finances, and encourages it to urgently develop and adopt an improved law on free access to information;
31. Notes the upcoming population and housing census in Montenegro, and calls on the institutions responsible to hold it in line with European standards and international recommendations; urges to avoid any politicisation of the process and calls for an investigation of all accusations related to foreign interference in the census procedure;
32. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to devote special attention to money laundering, tax evasion and any other criminal activity in the framework of the investor citizenship scheme, which will expire in 2021; welcomes the recent decision of the Montenegrin Government to phase it out by the end of the year;

Respect of fundamental freedoms and human rights

33. Deplores the state of freedom of expression and media freedom, an area in which five successive Commission reports have noted 'no progress', especially when it comes to the work of the public broadcasting service RTCG; strongly condemns all types of attacks against the media and intimidation of journalists, and calls for the urgent and effective investigation of these, including past cases, in order to end impunity for crimes against journalists; regrets that some cases of violence against journalists still remain unsolved; calls for further steps to be taken to ensure the independence of the media and journalists; urges Montenegro to provide conditions conducive to the effective exercise of freedom of expression, which is one of the EU's fundamental values and a crucial element of Montenegro's EU accession process;
34. Is concerned about the high polarisation of the media landscape, in particular the growing volume of disinformation, which is also aimed at exacerbating ethnic tensions, distorting electoral processes and reducing the support of the population for Euro-Atlantic integration; underlines that media literacy, media freedom and independence are key to combating disinformation; stresses the need to improve coordination in order to fight regional disinformation campaigns;

35. Calls for the strengthening of European cooperation with Montenegro on addressing disinformation, and cyber and hybrid threats that seek to undermine the European perspective of the region; is concerned about the growing vulnerability of Montenegro owing to the increase of its public debt, in particular to China; calls in this context on the Commission and the Montenegrin Government to cooperate on finding a solution for the highly controversial Chinese Bar-Boljare highway loan taken out by the previous government, in order to avoid debt dependency and Montenegro having to turn over collateral to the Chinese creditors; insists that in parallel the Montenegrin authorities must conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into this loan and its spending and hold those politically responsible to account; calls on the Commission to find, together with international financial institutions, a reasonable solution to support Montenegro's fiscal sustainability and reforms in line with the country's European perspective;
36. Calls on Montenegro, the EU Member States and the Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro to continue pursuing a more active and effective communication policy on the European perspective, aimed at both local and EU citizens, and to continue their coordinated efforts to increase the visibility of EU-funded projects; calls on the Commission and the European External Action Service to support the creation of a Balkan-focused centre of excellence on disinformation;
37. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to take concrete steps in building resilience and cybersecurity at a time when the country is facing increasing pressure through foreign interference that seeks to undermine its statehood and pro-Western orientation, and to enforce greater oversight of the media landscape in order to tackle fake news and other disinformation activities, in particular those orchestrated by harmful foreign influences, and to ensure operational independence of Montenegro's media regulators and public service broadcaster, while striking a balance between the fight against disinformation and disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression online;
38. Strongly condemns verbal and physical attacks against and intimidation of national minorities, especially in Pljevlja following the August 2020 parliamentary elections and recently in Berane and Niksic; urges the Montenegrin authorities to thoroughly investigate all those incidents and bring the perpetrators to justice;
39. Emphasises the need to protect all of the national minorities' rights, in particular as some of them no longer have minority party representatives in the *Skupština*; urges the Montenegrin authorities to pay special attention to issues related to the national and ethnic affiliation of Montenegrin citizens; takes note, in this respect, of the recent proposal by the Montenegrin Government on amending the Montenegrin citizenship law; underlines that any amendments to such sensitive laws must undergo a broad consultation process and should only be adopted in line with democratic norms and established European practice and with a view to advancing Montenegro's European perspective; calls for respect of the multi-ethnic identity of the country, including the languages used, cultural heritage and the traditions of local communities; stresses that further progress has to be made in the social inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in the labour market, education and public life in Montenegro, and calls on the authorities to ensure their access to personal documents, to guarantee their legal status and to take effective measures against hate speech;

40. Takes note of the Law on Domestic Violence Protection and the planned changes to it, and urges the Montenegrin authorities to thoroughly implement it, including by allocating sufficient resources, as gender-based, domestic violence and violence against children remain an issue of serious concern; calls for more vigilance and the establishment of support systems for victims of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic;
41. Calls on the authorities to ensure a thorough implementation of the standards set out in the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), including by increasing the number of well-trained and gender-sensitive law enforcement officers and judges, so as to ensure the proper investigation and prosecution of domestic violence crimes, and to introduce effective measures against sexual harassment, including in the workplace;
42. Is concerned about the limited results of the existing policies and projects aimed at encouraging women's participation in the labour market, policymaking and politics and tackling vulnerabilities in employment and in social policies; regrets in this respect the declining number of female MPs, the lack of gender-balanced political representation in elections and in the new *Skupština* and government; calls for necessary legal and policy measures to promote the participation of women in politics;
43. Recalls that while the Montenegrin Government approved the annual action plan for the strategy for the protection of persons with disabilities from discrimination and for the promotion of equality, its implementation remains the key goal; regrets that persons with disabilities still face discrimination and difficulties in gaining access to justice; stresses that access to healthcare services needs to be improved for people with disabilities, internally displaced persons and other vulnerable groups;
44. Welcomes the progress made on the protection of the rights of LGBTI persons and the fact that Montenegro is the first country in the region to adopt a law on same-sex partnerships; calls on the authorities to ensure the fulfilment of all necessary conditions for its adequate implementation; stresses that the situation of transgender and non-binary persons needs to be improved; welcomes the peaceful conduct of the pride parade in 2019; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to continue to improve the climate of societal inclusion and tolerance and to collect disaggregated data relating to hate speech and crime based on sexual orientation and gender identity;
45. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to continue a genuine dialogue on freedom of religion with religious representatives and other relevant stakeholders and in line with the Venice Commission's opinion of 24 June 2019; calls on neighbouring countries to refrain from interfering in this issue and other internal affairs of Montenegro;
46. Expresses concern that the new government adopted amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities in an urgent procedure without public debate or dialogue with all religious communities and without the opinion of the Venice Commission; notes that the president has signed the law;

Reconciliation, good neighbourly relations and international cooperation

47. Commends Montenegro for its commitment to inclusive regional cooperation, and the constructive role it plays in the Western Balkan region, and welcomes its active participation in numerous regional initiatives; underlines that regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are linked to Montenegro's EU perspective;
48. Welcomes the signing of the Protocol on the Determination of the Border Point between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia in May 2019 and encourages Montenegro to continue to address, in a constructive spirit and as early as possible in the accession process, outstanding bilateral issues with its neighbours, including the unresolved border demarcation issues with Serbia and Croatia; recalls that existing bilateral border agreements should be respected; reiterates that border disputes should be dealt with in the spirit of good neighbourly relations, bilaterally, and through existing international mechanisms; notes that bilateral relations with Serbia have been marked by tensions and insists that all bilateral disputes be resolved through inclusive and non-confrontational dialogue, while avoiding any form of foreign interference in domestic issues;
49. Strongly condemns the denial of the Srebrenica genocide and the doubts cast on the rulings and legitimacy of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) by the Minister of Justice, Human and Minority Rights; welcomes the swift rebuttals by other members of the government and the proposal for his dismissal;
50. Welcomes the establishment of the Common Regional Market, which will lead the way to the country's full accession to the EU Single Market; strongly believes that such initiatives could be an important tool to increase the potential, attractiveness and competitiveness of the region and in particular could help the regional economies in their post-pandemic recovery process;
51. Strongly condemns any attempts by politicians in Montenegro and elsewhere in the region to deny the Srebrenica genocide or any other war crimes that took place in the former Yugoslavia; welcomes the signing of a protocol on cooperation in the search for missing persons between the Governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro as a good example of cooperation in investigating cases of missing persons; is concerned by the lack of progress in dealing with war crimes committed in Montenegro and calls on the authorities to intensify their efforts to punish war crimes and determine the fate of missing persons and to support and develop the established Documentation and Information Centre;
52. Reiterates its support for the initiative to create the Regional Commission for the establishment of facts about war crimes and other gross human rights violations on the territory of the former Yugoslavia (RECOM); commends the Governments of Montenegro on their commitment and fulfilment of their obligations in the framework of their Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) membership, underlining the importance of the current Montenegrin rotating chairmanship of this organisation;
53. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to comply fully with the provisions on succession of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, especially as regards military assets;
54. Commends Montenegro's full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy and its active participation in EU missions under the common security and

defence policy, notably the ‘EU Naval Force Somalia – Operation ATALANTA’ and the EU Training Mission in Mali, and in other international missions, notably the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan and the NATO mission in Kosovo (KFOR);

55. Expresses concern over the governmental appointments in the security and military intelligence sector and the danger that Montenegro’s strategic alliance with the EU and NATO could be called into question; underlines the strategic importance of Montenegro’s NATO membership and encourages the Montenegrin authorities to cooperate in the field of resilience to foreign interference and cybersecurity with both the EU and NATO;
56. Underlines the need for the EU and the United States to strengthen their partnership and coordination in the Western Balkans in order to advance key reforms, improve governance and bring about reconciliation;
57. Welcomes Montenegro’s progress on and renewed commitment to international police cooperation, and encourages it to continue its efforts to cope with irregular migration by further developing its international cooperation on the protection of borders, readmission and raising its capacity to prosecute migrant-smuggling networks;
58. Notes the entry into force of the agreement on border management cooperation between Montenegro and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), which will allow Frontex to assist Montenegro in border management, carrying out joint operations and tackling cross-border crime at the country’s sea borders, including the smuggling of drugs and weapons, and trafficking in human beings and terrorism;
59. Urges the Montenegrin authorities to keep respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and international law at the core of their migration and border policies; calls for European Border and Coast Guard (Frontex) operations on Montenegrin territory to operate by these same standards;

The economy and the COVID-19 pandemic

60. Welcomes Montenegro’s progress in increasing the stability of its financial sector, as well as in implementing concrete improvements to labour market conditions; notes however, that the unemployment rate remains high, particularly among women, young people, Roma and low-skilled people; encourages authorities to improve the participation of women in the labour market and to address issues such as the gender gap in employment and pay, and affordable childcare;
61. Expresses concern that the Budget Law for 2021 was not proposed until the end of 2020 and calls for a more transparent and timely national budgeting process;
62. Welcomes the implementation by Montenegro of the necessary reforms to comply with EU tax good governance principles and its removal by the Council on 18 February 2020 from the list of non-cooperative jurisdictions for tax purposes;
63. Encourages Montenegro to intensify work on better aligning the education system with the labour market in order to more effectively tackle the phenomena of skills mismatch and brain drain among young people; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to strive for

an open and transparent human resource policy in public administration as well as for increased public investments for sustainable social and economic development;

64. Notes with concern the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Montenegro's economy, as its gross domestic product declined by 14,3 % in 2020; calls on the government to carry out a responsible macroeconomic and fiscal policy in view of the high public debt; encourages the authorities to make the best use of EU assistance in order to mitigate the impact of the crisis, including developing and implementing targeted measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on marginalised communities and vulnerable people; underlines the importance of developing entrepreneurial skills among young people;
65. Calls on the Commission to support Montenegro's efforts to reduce unemployment, which was seriously exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular in the tourism sector, which accounts for more than 20 % of Montenegro's gross domestic product, taking into account the large decline in the number of tourists;
66. Reiterates the fact that the European Union swiftly mobilised immediate financial and material support for the Western Balkans to tackle the health emergency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and speed up the socio-economic recovery of the region; recalls that EUR 53 million was granted to Montenegro for the procurement of urgent medical equipment and to assist the sectors most seriously affected by the COVID-19 crisis; also recalls the decision to provide macro-financial assistance of up to EUR 60 million to help Montenegro to limit the negative socio-economic consequences of the pandemic;
67. Stresses the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on society as a whole, in particular women, single-parent families and vulnerable groups, such as Roma, Egyptians, LGBTI people, people with disabilities and other minorities, by deepening inequalities and exacerbating existing problems; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to take into consideration the needs of these groups when creating and implementing COVID-19 socio-economic relief measures;
68. Commends the role of EU Civil Protection Mechanism, which has secured much-needed support in the form of medical and personal protective equipment in the fight against COVID-19 in Montenegro;
69. Expresses concern about the ongoing process to dismiss leaders in public health institutions at a time when Montenegro is seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the new EUR 750 million loan taken out by the government, without consulting the *Skupština*;
70. Calls on the Commission and the Council to show their solidarity with Western Balkan countries by helping them to receive COVID-19 vaccines and to include Montenegro in joint EU procurement for vaccinations; welcomes the actions taken by the Commission and the Council to help Montenegro procure vaccines against COVID-19 via COVAX and by other means such as coordinating donations by EU Member States; calls for further assistance to ensure that a sufficient amount of COVID-19 vaccines are available to people in all Western Balkan countries as soon as possible, taking into consideration each country's pandemic situation; strongly believes that vaccine policies

in general should be humanitarian and should not serve geopolitical interests of any kind;

71. Encourages Montenegro to make best use of the Commission's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans; recognises its importance in supporting sustainable connectivity in transport and infrastructure, human capital, competitiveness and inclusive growth in the region while stressing that any investment must be in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement and the EU's decarbonisation targets;
72. Notes the equal importance of all investment targets of IPA III; calls on the Commission, in this respect, to focus an appropriate share of the IPA III funds on the ongoing democratic transition of Montenegro, especially in the light of persistent problems with the investment climate, absorption capacity and environmental standards in the country;

Environment, energy and transport

73. Welcomes Montenegro's progress in diversifying its electricity production towards renewable sources and exceeding its overall 2020 renewables target and sectorial targets for electricity and heating and cooling, as well as its active participation in the Western Balkans Connectivity Agenda; invites Montenegro to introduce streamlined and simplified rules for facilitating the further deployment of renewable projects; highlights the importance of EU support for the shift towards cleaner and renewable energy; is concerned about oil and gas drilling projects just off the Montenegrin coast which may be harming the environment, nature and tourism, the country's most important economic sector;
74. Commends Montenegro's decision to discontinue financial support for small hydropower plants that do not follow appropriate environmental standards; notes the slow progress and the delay in shutting down the Pljevlja thermal power plant and invites Montenegro to comply with the rules of the Large Combustion Plant Directive¹ without delay;
75. Recognises the steps Montenegro has taken to establish an electronic system for guarantees of origin, in order to ensure compatibility with the standardised European Energy Certificate System; takes note of the advanced stage of implementing reforms in the electricity sector and invites Montenegro to transpose the REMIT Regulation² without delay and transpose network codes into national grid codes; invites Montenegro to increase the current low level of cross-zonal capacities available to electricity market participants in line with the best EU practices; commends Montenegro for being a frontrunner in establishing a carbon pricing and emission trading mechanism in the

¹ Directive 2001/80/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2001 on the limitation of emissions of certain pollutants into the air from large combustion plants (OJ L 309, 27.11.2001, p. 1).

² Regulation (EU) No 1227/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on wholesale energy market integrity and transparency (OJ L 326, 8.12.2011, p. 1).

region; welcomes the full compliance achieved as regards the Fuel Quality Directive¹ and calls for further progress in holding emergency oil stocks;

76. Welcomes the positive developments in further aligning Montenegro's national environmental and climate change legislation, national energy and climate plan, with the EU *acquis* and calls for further efforts to finalise the document as soon as possible in line with the recommendations of the Ministerial Council of the Energy Community; commends Montenegro for protecting the Zeta river as a nature park; calls on the authorities to take urgent measures to better safeguard protected areas and potential Natura 2000 sites, including Ulcinj Salina, Lake Skadar, the Tara River and others; calls on Montenegro to improve waste management and address the issue of illegal waste disposal; calls on the authorities to include local communities and civil society in the implementation of environmental, climate and energy policies and projects in the country;
77. Recalls with satisfaction that according to Article 1 of its constitution, Montenegro is an ecological state; recalls that establishing Sinjajevina military training and weapons testing areas in UNESCO-protected areas must follow UNESCO principles of socio-cultural and ecological sustainability; notes that the development of additional hydropower and tourism capacities, particularly those in protected areas, should take into account EU environmental protection standards; calls on the authorities to assess the environmental effects of the construction of the highway alongside Tara River and to better protect the most valuable areas; reiterates its call to conduct thorough and comprehensive *ex ante* environmental, economic and social impact assessments of infrastructure projects in line with European standards;
78. Welcomes the launching of the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans, which has the potential to drive the transition towards a sustainable, carbon-neutral economy; calls on Montenegro to continue introducing and implementing the necessary legislation to achieve the agreed common goals on the digital and green transformation;
79. Calls on Montenegro, the fourth European country for forest coverage, to improve the management of its forests, in particular by dedicating more resources to them and actively combating illegal logging; takes note of a recent study underlining that about one hundred thousand cubic metres of wood waste, which can easily be reused, are produced in Montenegro every year; calls on the authorities to reflect on ways to promote circular economy models in this and other sectors of the economy;
80. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to ensure the right to access to environmental information regarding infrastructure projects, in line with its constitution and the Aarhus Convention, which Montenegro ratified in 2009;

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¹ Directive 2009/30/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2009 amending Directive 98/70/EC as regards the specification of petrol, diesel and gas-oil and introducing a mechanism to monitor and reduce greenhouse gas emissions (OJ L 140, 5.6.2009, p. 88).

81. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the President of the European Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, and to the President, and the Government and Parliament of Montenegro.