

Thursday 23 June 2022

P9_TA(2022)0266

2021 Report on Montenegro**European Parliament resolution of 23 June 2022 on the 2021 Commission Report on Montenegro (2021/2247(INI))**

(2023/C 32/08)

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 part ⁽¹⁾, 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,
- having regard to the Zagreb declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 6 May 2020,
- having regard to the Brdo Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 6 October 2021,
- having regard to the Sofia Summit of 10 November 2020, the Western Balkans Leaders Declaration on Common Regional Market of 9 November 2020 and the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans of 10 November 2020,
- having regard to the Berlin Process launched on 28 August 2014,
- 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 6 October 2020 entitled 'Economic and Investment plan for the Western Balkans' (COM(2020)0641),
- having regard to the Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III) ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to special report 01/2022 of 10 January 2022 of the European Court of Auditors entitled 'EU support for the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts fundamental problems persist',
- having regard to the Commission communication of 19 October 2021 entitled '2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy' (COM(2021)0644), accompanied by the Commission staff working document entitled 'Montenegro 2021 Report' (SWD(2021)0293),
- having regard to the Commission's Overview & Country Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme of Montenegro of July 2021,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 108, 29.4.2010, p. 1.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 330, 20.9.2021, p. 1.

Thursday 23 June 2022

- having regard to the joint conclusions of the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans and Turkey, adopted by the Council on 12 July 2021,
 - 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 the EU-Montenegro Intergovernmental Accession Conference of 22 June 2021 and of 13 December 2021,
 - having regard to the Venice Commission’s opinions of March and May 2021 on the revised draft amendments to the law on the State Prosecution Service and to its previous opinions,
 - 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 summit ⁽³⁾,
 - having regard to its previous resolutions on the country,
 - having regard to the declaration and recommendations adopted at the 20th meeting of the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), held on 2 December 2021,
 - having regard to the joint declaration of the Second European Parliament-Western Balkans Speakers’ Summit of 28 June 2021, convened by the President of the European Parliament with the leaders of the Western Balkan parliaments,
 - having regard to its resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Montenegro ⁽⁴⁾,
 - having regard to its resolution of 15 December 2021 on cooperation on the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans ⁽⁵⁾,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0151/2022),
- A. whereas each enlargement country is judged on its own merits, and the implementation of necessary reforms, in particular in the area of rule of law, determines the timetable and progress of accession;
- B. whereas Montenegro is the most advanced of candidate countries in its negotiation process, having opened all 33 screened chapters of the EU *acquis* and provisionally closed three;
- C. whereas 80 % of its citizens support the country’s future membership of the EU;
- D. whereas the period after the 2020 elections was marked by deep polarisation between the new ruling majority and the opposition, as well as within the ruling majority; whereas boycotts and the lack of constructive engagement of all parliamentary actors impeded decision-making in the Parliament;
- E. whereas during the Intergovernmental Conference of 22 June 2021, Montenegro accepted the revised enlargement methodology based on thematic negotiation chapter clusters and the phasing-in of individual EU policies and programmes;

⁽³⁾ OJ C 362, 8.9.2021, p. 129.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 15, 12.1.2022, p. 100.

⁽⁵⁾ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2021)0506.

Thursday 23 June 2022

- F. whereas the European Union is Montenegro's biggest trading partner, accounting for 38 % of total exports and 44 % of total imports in 2020; whereas the EU is the largest provider of financial assistance to Montenegro and whereas Montenegro benefits from pre-accession assistance under the IPA, having received a total of EUR 504,9 million between 2007 and 2020;
- G. whereas the EU has continuously shown its commitment for the European perspective of Western Balkan countries and mobilised EUR 3,3 billion to address the immediate health crisis and mitigate economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- H. whereas the assistance under IPA III is based on strict conditionality and provides for modulation and suspension of assistance if there is backtracking on democracy, human rights and the rule of law;
- I. whereas Montenegro is exposed to foreign interference and malicious disinformation campaigns originating from Russia and other countries;

Commitment to enlargement

1. Welcomes Montenegro's continued commitment to European integration and the unwavering support of its citizens for membership of the EU; underlines that progress in the negotiations continues to depend on meeting the rule of law interim benchmarks;
2. Notes that all 33 screened chapters have been opened, but regrets that none have been closed since 2017, slowing down Montenegro's positive track record and status as the most advanced Western Balkans country in its progress towards EU accession; welcomes Montenegro's acceptance of the revised enlargement methodology; encourages Montenegro to continue specifically focusing on meeting the remaining interim benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24 and thereafter on closing chapters;
3. Reiterates that cross-party political commitment and a functioning parliamentary democracy are necessary for EU-related reforms and calls for constructive and inclusive political dialogue and commitment of all parliamentary parties to overcome the current polarised political climate and strengthen the functioning and coordination between state institutions in order to achieve political stability and continue its substantial progress in key EU-related reforms, in particular electoral and judicial reforms and the fight against organised crime and corruption;
4. Notes the vote of no confidence in the government on 4 February 2022 and the ensuing dismissal of the Parliament's speaker and the EU-Montenegro SAPC Co-Chair; notes that the President of Montenegro had appointed the URA party leader as prime-minister designate charged with forming a government;
5. Welcomes the new minority government composed of pro-European parties, which is especially welcome in light of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continuous influence of pro-Russian political parties and narratives in the country; welcomes the election of a new speaker, and calls for the appointment of the EU-Montenegro SAPC Co-Chair as soon as possible; believes that the new government's political resolve could help accelerate the much needed reform process, reflecting both Montenegro's work on European values and the will of an overwhelming majority of Montenegrin citizens to join the European Union;
6. Calls for resumption of inclusive dialogue among all parliamentary parties and relevant stakeholders with a view to building a strong pro-European and democratic platform that can ensure the necessary stability and reduce political polarisation and radicalisation in line with the constitution, respect for democratic processes, norms and standards and the pro-European aspirations of an overwhelming majority of Montenegro's citizens;
7. Notes the protests against the possible formation of a minority government organised by the Democratic Front and Democratic Montenegro; invites all political parties to express their views within institutionalised democratic procedures and to refrain from escalating tensions;

Thursday 23 June 2022

8. Strongly condemns the support expressed for the Russian Federation by protesters and some political leaders on the day of the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, but notes the relatively small scale of these demonstrations; recalls Russia's persistent and continuous interest in destabilising the country and the whole Western Balkan region and in diverting it from its European path through the spread of manipulative disinformation and influence on state and non-state actors;

9. Notes that the work has intensified following the long-awaited finalisation of appointments to administrative structures in the area of rule of law; regrets that key positions in negotiating structures have remained vacant for a long time; notes the efforts to consolidate and upgrade the negotiating structure in 2021; urges the authorities to re-establish a fully functional negotiating structure as soon as possible; notes that the delayed appointment of key negotiators and heads of working groups must be followed by other steps to maintain the accession process as a political priority;

10. Welcomes Montenegro's continued and full alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, including its condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its full support for the latest EU sanctions against Russia, including the ban on the Russian flights overflying its airspace and using its airports, the prohibition of transactions with Russia's Central Bank and the ban on Russian propaganda media outlets, Russia Today and Sputnik; encourages the Commission to consider EU economic and financial assistance for Western Balkan countries that have joined EU sanctions against Russia, in order to mitigate the consequences of the crisis as it develops;

11. Welcomes Montenegro's adoption of its own temporary protection mechanism for persons fleeing Ukraine, granting them the right to stay in the country for one year, and welcomes Montenegro's contribution to humanitarian aid to Ukraine;

12. Calls for the seizure of the assets of the persons sanctioned by the Montenegrin authorities and for it to be ensured that the country does not become a safe zone for hiding the assets of Russian oligarchs threatened with international sanctions; encourages the government to continue taking the steps needed to enable the competent national authorities to take the necessary decisions to implement the adopted sanctions;

13. Welcomes Montenegro's active participation in EU Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations, as well as in other international missions; underlines the importance of Montenegro's strategic alliance with the EU and with NATO; condemns attempts in the government, security and military sector to question its strategic orientation; encourages the Montenegrin authorities to cooperate with both the EU and NATO on resilience to foreign interference, manipulative foreign disinformation and cybersecurity;

14. Encourages Montenegro to make best use of the EU funding available under the IPA III and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans in order to strengthen institution-building and foster economic and democratic development, especially in the areas of rule of law, fundamental freedoms and the wellbeing of its citizens; highlights that any investment must be in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement and EU decarbonisation targets; urges the Commission to closely monitor performance and ensure systematic assessment of the impact of EU funding;

Democracy and the rule of law

15. Is deeply concerned by the continuing political tensions between and within the executive and legislative powers, and by the recent blocking of parliamentary sessions, which has a direct impact on the speed and progress of Montenegro's EU-related reforms and continues to slow down the EU accession process; recalls that the only way to influence the decision-making process on behalf of constituents is to engage in political processes; calls on the legislative and executive authorities to improve coordination and prioritise legislative initiatives for the implementation of EU reforms; reiterates that political will, broad cross-party dialogue and functional parliamentary support, as well as the proper functioning of democratic institutions are key to Montenegro's progress in the accession negotiations;

Thursday 23 June 2022

16. Welcomes the recent appointments in the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals, and of new members of the Prosecutorial Council, including a member drawn from NGO representatives; is concerned about the overall lack of progress on judicial reform, including on the still pending appointments to key independent institutions and the judiciary, including the appointment of new Constitutional Court judges; encourages the Montenegrin authorities to take further steps to enhance the independence and functioning of the judiciary and other law enforcement bodies, as well as to fully implement the Venice Commission's recommendations concerning the risks of politicisation of the Prosecutorial Council; encourages follow-up on recommendations related to the judiciary made by Council of Europe Group of States against Corruption (GRECO);

17. Urges the Commission to seriously take into account special report 01/2022 of the European Court of Auditors and implement its recommendations, which would mean adapting its rule of law-related investments in the Western Balkans, including in Montenegro; calls on the EU and the Western Balkan countries to establish a framework for a fruitful cooperation between the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and the Western Balkan countries in order to ensure that the EPPO can effectively exercise its competences in the area of EU funds;

18. Welcomes the fact that the Parliament of Montenegro has adopted the amended Law on Local Self-Government, which provides that local elections in 14 municipalities are to be held on the same date; regrets, however, the recent decision to call elections in 12 municipalities on a different date; reiterates, once again, its calls encouraging Montenegro to hold local elections simultaneously across the country in order to bring more stability to its democracy, avoid constant campaigning and ease the tense political climate;

19. Notes that more efforts are needed to harmonise the electoral legal framework and regulate all key aspects of elections through an inclusive process, well in advance of the next elections; welcomes the continuation of the work of the Committee on Electoral Legislation Reform despite initial interruptions, and expects it to diligently work toward achieving meaningful reform; notes that the Jean Monnet Dialogue instrument in Montenegro could be helpful in building the consensus necessary for fostering a democratic parliamentary culture;

20. Is worried about the prevalent corruption in the country and urges Montenegro to step up the criminal justice response to high-level corruption and create conditions for the effective and independent functioning of judicial institutions and independent bodies dealing with corruption, including the Anti-Corruption Agency and the Special Prosecutors Office, to function effectively and free from political influence, in line with GRECO recommendations; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to launch thorough investigations into any wrongdoing exposed by the Pandora Papers;

21. Welcomes progress in the fight against organised crime and on international police cooperation, in particular in improving access for law enforcement agencies to key databases and increasing the number of investigators and experts, and the increase in the number of organised crime cases investigated and prosecuted; encourages the Montenegrin authorities to continue to address the existing deficiencies in the handling of organised crime cases and the seizure and confiscation of criminal assets;

22. Welcomes Montenegro's constructive cooperation with EU law enforcement agencies, such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), Europol, and Eurojust, which assist Montenegro in border management and the fight against cross-border crime, including trafficking of weapons, drugs, human beings and combating terrorism and extremism; notes as a positive example the police intervention in Mojkovac to tackle cigarette trafficking in Montenegro and reiterates that further measures are needed in order to tackle drug and cigarette smuggling in the country, especially in the Free Zone of the Port of Bar;

23. Welcomes the adoption of the Strategy on Migration and Reintegration of Returnees in Montenegro for the period 2021-2025; notes that the roadmap for cooperation between Montenegro and European Union Agency for Asylum (EASO) was signed in December 2021;

24. Regrets the limited progress made on the implementation of public administration reform and calls for the design process of the new Public Administration Reform Strategy to be inclusive and transparent; expresses concerns about changes to the Law on Civil Servants and State Employees, which lowered merit-based recruitment and the independence of civil servants, and jeopardised Montenegro's capacity to retain staff experienced in the EU accession process; stresses the need for a merit-based recruitment system for civil servants and the importance of the depoliticisation of the public service;

Thursday 23 June 2022

25. Welcomes the positive role of civil society in Montenegro and encourages further strengthening its meaningful participation in reforms and ensuring that there are functional consultation and cooperation mechanisms by improving the country's legal and institutional frameworks, as well as guaranteeing the involvement of independent experts, civil society and local stakeholders in key legislation;

26. Welcomes the first Citizens' Assembly organised on 4 November 2021 by the Parliament of Montenegro in cooperation with the European Parliament; welcomes the active participation of citizens and their commitment for designing anti-corruption policies; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to follow up on and implement the Assembly's conclusions on the fight against corruption, and stresses the importance of continuing this successful exercise in the future;

Respect of fundamental freedoms and human rights

27. Notes the limited progress on freedom of expression; encourages Montenegro to step up its efforts to fight disinformation, hate speech, online harassment, politically-biased reporting and foreign influence in the Montenegrin media; underlines the importance of exchanging best practices with the EU Member States and NATO, as well as convening dialogue with Western Balkan civil society and its private sector in order to identify worrying developments at an early stage and develop appropriate adequate countermeasures against the spread of manipulative disinformation from third countries, with an emphasis on research and analysis and the inclusion of best practices in the region;

28. Calls on the Commission to build up the infrastructure required to produce evidence-based responses to disinformation threats in the Western Balkans; calls on the European External Action Service (EEAS) to pivot to a more proactive stance, focusing on enhancing the EU's credibility in the region and on expanding StratCom monitoring to focus on cross-border disinformation threats emanating from Western Balkan countries and their neighbours; calls on Montenegro to take decisive and systemic actions towards identifying and dismantling disinformation factories; calls on politicians and public figures to firmly condemn any messages seeking to polarise society and undermining trust in the media and core democratic values;

29. Notes that the collection of disaggregated data relating to racism and homo/transphobic hate speech and crime remains suboptimal; recalls the 2020 conclusions from the monitoring report by the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), which stated that prior recommendations had not been implemented⁽⁶⁾; recalls Parliament's position in its last resolution on Montenegro, which called for this measure, and encourages the authorities to implement it⁽⁷⁾;

30. Expresses concern about the high degree of polarisation in the media landscape, in particular the growing volume of foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns and cyber and hybrid threats, including from Russia and China, spreading ethno-nationalist narratives that negatively impact democratic processes in the country thus endangering its European perspective; is worried by the increase in Montenegro's public debt to foreign financial institutions and companies from authoritarian non-EU countries; reiterates its support for the government's readiness to implement EU sanctions against Russian propaganda outlets;

31. Underlines the importance of media freedom and independence, high quality reporting and improving media literacy as key in fighting manipulative disinformation; calls on Montenegro, the Member States, the EEAS and the EU Delegation in Montenegro to continue pursuing more active and effective communication and visibility campaigns to emphasise the role and importance of EU assistance in Montenegro and fight anti-EU disinformation; including by setting up a regional strategic communication post in the Western Balkans; welcomes Montenegro's interest in cooperating with the EU via the Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and the important work of the EEAS Strategic Communication Western Balkans Task Force;

⁽⁶⁾ ECRI conclusions on the implementation of the recommendations in respect of Montenegro subject to interim follow-up, 2 June 2020, <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-conclusions-on-the-implementation-of-the-recommendations-in-respe/16809e8273>

⁽⁷⁾ Resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Montenegro (OJ C 15, 12.1.2022, p. 100).

Thursday 23 June 2022

32. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to take concrete steps to build resilience and cybersecurity as it faces increasing pressure from third country interference that seeks to undermine its statehood and pro-Western orientation, in close cooperation with relevant EU and NATO initiatives and programmes; welcomes the new Montenegro's Cyber Security Strategy 2022-2026 and calls for the legislative process establishing the Cyber Security Agency to move forward without delay;

33. Strongly condemns attacks and harassment of journalists and calls for these to be investigated, sanctioned and for there to be effective judicial follow-up; welcomes the introduction of tougher penalties for threats to or attacks on journalists through the adoption of amendments to the Criminal Code; calls on all political parties to take further steps to ensure the conditions for the work of independent and free media, including support for public interest reporting, transparent funding, shared regulatory standards and a safe working environment free from attacks and threats;

34. Welcomes some positive steps, such as an ad hoc commission for monitoring violence against the media, the strengthening of the legal framework in order to effectively protect journalists and other media workers, the revision of laws on media and on the editorial policy of the public broadcaster RTCG, which has been made more pluralistic, and public consultations on a media strategy for 2021-2025; underlines the importance of the independence of Montenegro's media regulators and public service broadcaster, and calls for further efforts to transform the RTCG into a real public service and in general to improve access to information;

35. Condemns all violent acts during the demonstrations in Cetinje linked to the inauguration of the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church; condemns Serbian interference in this regard; calls for religious tolerance in line with the Montenegrin constitution and European values and principles;

36. Notes that foreign interference can also be pursued through the instrumentalisation of religious institutes; condemns Russia's efforts to exploit ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans in order to inflame conflicts, divide communities and spread manipulative disinformation, which could lead to the destabilisation of the whole region;

37. Notes another delay in the population and housing census in Montenegro, and expects that it to be conducted in the course of this year in line with EU and international standards, in an open and transparent way, without fear of intimidation for all recognised national minorities; calls on the authorities to avoid any politicisation of the process;

38. Welcomes the multi-ethnic identity of the country and calls for further promoting it and respecting it on all levels, including the languages used, cultural heritage and the traditions of local communities, as well as for protecting their political rights; emphasises the need to protect all of the national minorities' political rights, in particular as some of them no longer have minority party representatives in the Parliament of Montenegro;

39. Strongly condemns verbal and physical attacks against and intimidation of any minorities, including national minorities; regrets that vulnerable groups, including Roma and Egyptians, continue to experience multiple forms of discrimination and difficulties in exercising their rights; welcomes the adoption of the strategy for the inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025, which pays special attention to anti-gypsyism and encourages the authorities to further increase efforts to fight discrimination, ensure fair access to education, justice, housing, healthcare and the labour market, and to take effective measures against hate speech;

40. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to acknowledge the tradition and cultural heritage of the Croatian community in the multi-ethnic Bay of Kotor; notes with concern the notice of eviction by 15 April 2022 received by the Croatian National Assembly in Tivat;

41. Notes that gender-based violence and violence against children continue to be of serious concern, and that this has deteriorated further during the COVID-19 pandemic; calls for improving specialist support services for women, disadvantaged groups and victims of domestic abuse, and calls on Montenegro to provide adequate funding for this, including to civil society organisations providing such support; welcomes the proposal to introduce tougher penalties for violence against women and children;

Thursday 23 June 2022

42. Urges the Montenegrin authorities to thoroughly implement the standards of the Istanbul Convention, launch public awareness-raising campaigns, encourage reporting of domestic violence in safe conditions, and increase the number of well-trained and gender-sensitive law enforcement officers and judges so as to ensure the proper investigation and prosecution of such crimes; urges the Montenegrin authorities to implement effective measures against sexual harassment, including at the work place; remains worried by frequent hate speech and sexism directed at women in politics and public life and calls for the adoption of legal and policy measures to promote the political participation of women;

43. Welcomes the establishment of the Council for the Rights of the Child; stresses the need to further improve the treatment of children in civil proceedings and child-friendly justice; deplores insufficient protection of victims, especially women and children including during and after custody court proceedings; calls on all state bodies to systematically approach this issue on the basis of the highest protection and support standards and best European practices;

44. Welcomes progress on the protection and promotion of LGBTIQ rights and the first same-sex registered partnership in July 2021, and the peaceful organisation of Pride in 2021; calls on Montenegro to continue to harmonise and amend other laws and bylaws, in particular on social benefits and residence, in order to fully implement the law on registered partnership; calls for further measures against hate speech, social exclusion and discrimination of the LGBTIQ community, and to improve their access to justice, employment, housing and healthcare, inter alia by ensuring access to hormone therapy for trans people and respecting their physical and mental integrity;

45. Calls on Montenegro to properly include LGBTIQ civil society in the work of the new legal gender recognition working group, which should work towards legal gender recognition based on self-determination;

46. Regrets that persons with disabilities continue to face multiple forms of discrimination, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and deplores the lack of alignment of national legislation with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; welcomes the fact that the reform of the National Disability Determination System is under way and calls for the effective implementation of strategies to tackle gaps in upholding the rights of persons with disabilities across sectors and policies, including healthcare, the labour market and in administrative and judicial proceedings; stresses the urgent need for a de-institutionalisation strategy;

Reconciliation and good neighbourly relations

47. Commends Montenegro's constructive role in regional cooperation and welcomes the implementation of actions under the Western Balkans Common Regional Market; calls for concrete action to find and implement definite and binding solutions to long-running bilateral disputes in a constructive and neighbourly spirit, including border disputes with neighbouring countries and including the demarcation issues with Croatia and Serbia;

48. Emphasises that all regional economic cooperation in the Western Balkans should be inclusive and acceptable to all six countries, establishing cooperation on an equal footing, while strengthening further alignment with EU standards and the *acquis*; expresses, in this context, its cautious view towards the Open Balkan Initiative, which does not encompass all six countries, and expresses its conviction that it should be based on EU rules and bring only positive impacts on the EU integration process;

49. Welcomes the removal of roaming charges between Montenegro and five other Western Balkan states as of 1 July 2021; urges the government and the Commission to negotiate a plan that would lead to the speedy elimination of roaming charges between Montenegro and EU Member States;

50. Notes Montenegro's continued cooperation under the Sarajevo Declaration Process; welcomes the adoption of the resolution on Srebrenica of 17 June 2021; welcomes the first ever attendance by the Foreign Minister of Montenegro of the joint commemoration of Morinj camp victims; notes that since 2006 just eight war crime trials have been held and only low-level perpetrators have been tried; underlines there should be no tolerance for genocide denial, inflammatory rhetoric or the glorification of war criminals;

Thursday 23 June 2022

51. Urges Montenegro to intensify its efforts in proactively prioritising and punishing war crimes and their glorification and in clarifying the fate of missing persons; recalls the need to open up former Yugoslav secret service archives and follow the legal procedures to transfer relevant files to the Montenegrin state archives;

52. 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;

The economy

53. Expresses its concern about the persistently high unemployment rate, in particular among women and young people, and urges the authorities to step up efforts to improve their access to the labour market and address the brain drain, the gender gaps in employment and pay, and the availability of affordable childcare; reiterates the need for better alignment of the education system with the job market; notes the recovery of the labour market and welcomes the steps towards implementing the Youth Guarantee Programme;

54. Notes the announcement of the 'Europe Now' initiative, which aims to achieve higher living standards and a more competitive economy through more sustainable and inclusive economic growth model;

55. Expresses concern over Montenegro's sustainable macroeconomic stability and growing vulnerability owing to the increase of its public debt, in particular to China, and the new EUR 750 million loan taken by the government without consulting the Parliament; welcomes efforts made towards decreasing these fiscal vulnerabilities, including those related to China; calls on the Commission to follow up on the macroeconomic situation and vulnerability in the next country report; notes that investments by third countries and foreign companies in strategic sectors may pose a risk of creating unwarranted economic dependencies;

56. Notes with concern the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Montenegro's economy; notes the encouraging signs of Montenegro's economic recovery in 2021 following a deep recession in 2020, and welcomes Montenegro's projected strong economic growth; calls for more sustainable economic and financial planning as well as a more timely and constructive response to minimise the damage caused by the pandemic to social groups in the most vulnerable situations; calls on the government to organise genuine social dialogue in the post-pandemic recovery process;

57. Welcomes the disbursement of a EUR 60 million from the COVID-19 Macro-Financial Assistance package aimed at mitigating economic impacts of the pandemic and preserving macroeconomic stability, as well as the mobilisation of EUR 14,2 billion from IPA III to support Western Balkans partners in meeting the requirements for European Union membership;

58. Welcomes the announcement of public services digitalisation and development of transactional electronic government services to enhance economic recovery; calls on the Montenegrin government to promote the digital inclusion of all social groups, and encourages the development of targeted preventive measures and incentives to legalise informal businesses and employees, as a large informal sector continues to hinder economic and social development in Montenegro;

59. Welcomes the signing of the Association Agreement to the Horizon Europe programme 2021-2027;

60. Strongly condemns the so-called golden passport scheme and regrets its extension until December 2022 despite previous announcements that the scheme would be phased out and without wider consultation of relevant institutions; urges Montenegro to take more action to prevent money laundering; stresses that citizenship by investment carries security risks and potential for corruption, money laundering and tax evasion; calls on Montenegro to immediately terminate the scheme; notes with concern that between December 2020 and 2022 almost 200 citizenship were granted to Russian nationals;

Environment, energy and transport

61. Welcomes the adoption of a national climate change adaptation plan and encourages Montenegro to speed up reforms in line with the EU's 2030 climate and energy policy framework and strengthen its implementation procedures; calls on the authorities to make the best use of available EU pre-accession assistance in this regard in order to move towards closing the benchmarks of Chapter 27 (environment and climate change);

Thursday 23 June 2022

62. Welcomes the clean energy package adopted in November 2021; encourages the authorities to make progress in drafting its national energy and climate plan, focusing on sustainable renewable energy sources and avoiding new investments in fossil gas and coal-based infrastructure and to submit it to the Energy Community Secretariat for its recommendations; calls on Montenegro to increase its efforts to cut its electricity distribution network losses, to diversify its renewable sources and reduce its reliance on climate-vulnerable hydropower generation; welcomes the suspension of concession agreements for small hydropower plants that did not follow appropriate environmental standards and calls for all new projects to respect EU environment, State aid and concession standards; urges the authorities to improve monitoring and implementation of air quality measures in polluted areas;

63. Regrets that the operation of the Pljevlja coal power plant continues after it exceeded the number of operating hours and reiterates its urgent call on the Montenegrin authorities to immediately bring it into compliance with the Energy Community Treaty; notes with caution the EUR 15 million cost increase for the planned reconstruction of the plant in line with environmental standards, which has not yet started; calls on the authorities to publish the feasibility study and the findings of the public prosecutor's investigation into the tender process, and to consider a comprehensive transition plan with a view to the plant's planned closure;

64. Reiterates its call on Montenegro to take urgent measures to effectively conserve protected areas, and encourages it to continue identifying potential Natura 2000 sites; welcomes the proclamation of three marine protected areas (Platamuni, Katič and Stari Ulcinj) and the nomination of the beech forests in Biogradska Gora National Park for inclusion on the UNESCO world heritage list; expresses concern about damage to bodies of water and rivers related to infrastructure projects, including Lake Skadar, Sinjajevina, Komarnica and others; regrets that despite initial progress the Sinjajevina issue is still not solved; underlines the need for assessment and compliance with the Habitats Directive and the Water Framework Directive; urges the Montenegrin authorities to enforce effective, dissuasive and proportionate penalties for all environmental offences and to root out corruption in this sector;

65. Regrets the lack of progress on key sectoral reforms in transport policy; calls on Montenegro to further implement its Transport Development Strategy and strengthen administrative capacities for the implementation of trans-European networks; underlines that in the Western Balkans, the construction sector is among the most vulnerable to organised crime and corruption; underlines that infrastructure investments need to comply with EU standards on environmental impact assessment and cost-benefit analyses while respecting EU rules on public procurement and State aid;

66. Notes China's increased interest in investing in the Western Balkans and transportation infrastructure projects in Montenegro as part of its Belt and Road Initiative; welcomes the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the EU Global Gateway Initiative as greener, transparent alternatives for financing infrastructure projects;

67. Notes with regret the damage to the Tara River Basin Biosphere Reserve and the Durmitor National Park UNESCO heritage site linked to the building of the Bar-Boljare highway; calls on Montenegro to implement riverbed revitalisation measures and closely monitor the environmental impact of transport infrastructure construction; expresses concern that the cost of the Bar-Boljare highway was largely underestimated and that no action has been taken in spite of unclear public procurement procedures, the lack of planning documentation and ecological concerns; notes that Montenegro's application for co-financing from the Western Balkans Investment Framework is pending;

68. Calls on Montenegro to address illegal waste disposal and to take further steps to improve planning procedures for wastewater facilities with a view to speeding up their construction; notes the lack of progress and rising costs in building essential wastewater treatment plants to prevent sewage pollution in seven municipalities;

69. Encourages Montenegro to step up its action on institutional and legislative reforms on hunting and fishing, with a particular focus on protected areas and protected species;

Thursday 23 June 2022

70. 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, the Government and Parliament of Montenegro.
