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2022 Report on Montenegro

European Parliament resolution of 18 October 2023 on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro (2022/2202(INI))

(C/2024/2653)

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 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 on 'competition policy', were opened,
- 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 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 the Presidency conclusions of the Thessaloniki European Council meeting of 19-20 June 2003,
- having regard to the declarations of the EU-Western Balkans summits of 17 May 2018 in Sofia, of 6 May 2020 in Zagreb, of 6 October 2021 in Brdo pri Kranju and of 6 December 2022 in Tirana,
- 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 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 Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled 'An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans' (COM(2020)0641),
- having regard to the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans signed by Montenegro on 10 November 2020,
- 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 Assessments of July 2021 of the Economic Reform Programme of Montenegro 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 12 July 2021,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 108, 29.4.2010, p. 3.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 330, 20.9.2021, p. 1.

- having regard to the EU-Montenegro Intergovernmental Accession Conference of 22 June 2021 and of 13 December 2021,
 - having regard to the 11th EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Council of 14 July 2022 in Podgorica,
 - having regard to the declaration and recommendations adopted at the 20th meeting of the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee, held on 2 December 2021,
 - having regard to Montenegro's accession to NATO on 5 June 2017,
 - having regard to Special Report 01/2022 of the European Court of Auditors: EU support for the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist, of 10 January 2022,
 - having regard to the speech by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum on 23 May 2023,
 - having regard to Montenegro's status as a Contracting Party to the Energy Community Treaty since 1 January 2007,
 - 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 resolution of 15 December 2021 on cooperation on the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans ⁽⁴⁾,
 - having regard to its recommendation of 23 November 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the new EU strategy for enlargement ⁽⁵⁾,
 - having regard to its previous resolutions on Montenegro,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0277/2023),
- A. whereas enlargement is the EU's most effective foreign policy instrument, incentivising and encouraging fundamental reforms, including in the area of the rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights and freedom of expression, and a strategic and future-oriented geopolitical investment in peace, stability, democracy and security throughout the continent, in particular in the light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which has shown that non-enlargement comes at a massive strategic cost and can undermine security and stability in Europe;
- B. whereas the enlargement policy's effectiveness has considerably decreased in recent years due to a lack of genuine political will in advancing fundamental reforms of some of the political leaders of the enlargement countries, as well as delays by the EU in delivering on some of its promises; whereas this has also created a breeding ground for malign external actors in the Western Balkans region, in particular Russia and China;
- C. whereas the new enlargement momentum sparked by the changed geopolitical reality and the applications for EU membership by some Eastern Partnership countries have prompted the EU to accelerate taking action on its long-overdue deliverables to the Western Balkans; whereas the future of the Western Balkan countries lies in the EU;
- D. whereas political leaders in the EU Member States, as well as in the enlargement countries, need to prove their genuine commitment to enlargement based on the Copenhagen criteria by taking concrete steps and making progress in order to re-energise the whole process, ensuring its continuity, consistency, credibility, transparency and impact;

⁽³⁾ OJ C 362, 8.9.2021, p. 129.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 251, 30.6.2022, p. 87.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 167, 11.5.2023, p. 105.

- E. whereas each enlargement country is judged on its own merits; whereas the fulfilment of the enlargement criteria, the implementation of necessary reforms, in particular in the area of 'fundamentals', adherence to the principles of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and good governance, alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy, and legislative alignment determine the timetable and progress in the accession process;
- F. whereas the EU has reiterated its full and unequivocal commitment to Montenegro's EU membership perspective; whereas nearly 80 % of Montenegrin citizens support future EU membership;
- G. whereas Montenegro has gone the furthest in the EU accession process, having opened all 33 screened chapters of the EU *acquis* and provisionally closed three; whereas its integration into the EU is vital for the stability and prosperity of all of south-eastern Europe;
- H. whereas Montenegro has accepted the gradual adoption of the European Union's objectives and policies during the negotiation process;
- I. whereas Montenegro remains a candidate for EU accession and a NATO ally; whereas Montenegro is fully aligned with the EU's common foreign and security policy;
- J. whereas the EU continues to be the biggest trading partner and largest provider of investment and financial assistance to Montenegro through the IPA III, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe and macro-financial assistance;
- K. whereas Montenegro faces challenges stemming from malign foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, including from Russia;

Commitment to EU accession

1. Commends Montenegro's long-standing commitment to EU integration, underpinned by a high level of public support; reiterates its support for Montenegro in this regard; stresses that progress and the overall pace in negotiations depends on meeting interim rule of law benchmarks; notes that all 33 screened chapters have been opened, but regrets that no chapter has been closed in the past six years, slowing down Montenegro's progress and negatively affecting its positive record and status as the most advanced Western Balkan country on its path towards EU accession;
2. Reaffirms that the pace of the enlargement process remains linked to individual countries' capacity to meet the accession criteria, but that it also depends on the commitment of the political leaders in the Western Balkan countries and the EU; regrets in this regard any repeated postponements and reluctance by the Montenegrin ruling political elite to make progress in the EU negotiations;
3. Regrets the fact that high political tensions and polarisation, the failure to build consensus on matters of national interest and a lack of cross-party dialogue have delayed progress on EU-related reforms and plunged Montenegro into a deep political and institutional crisis; notes that, as a consequence, Montenegro's EU accession process has stalled and an important momentum to make significant progress was lost;
4. Takes note of the results of the presidential elections held in March and April 2023 and the early parliamentary elections held in June 2023; expresses its firm belief that Montenegro needs a stable pro-European government and an EU-oriented majority; encourages the formation of a new, stable and pro-European government capable and willing to continue on the EU accession path as soon as possible; encourages the President, the new parliament and the government to focus on the key reforms needed for the country to make progress in EU integration, ensure their properly and timely implementation, avoid deepening political polarisation and refrain from using inflammatory rhetoric and language in political discussions; remains ready to cooperate with all political actors to support the country in maintaining its strategic course;
5. Calls on all Montenegrin authorities to work together for the country's European future, thereby sending a clear message to Montenegrin citizens, and to communicate unambiguously on Montenegro's close relationship with the EU in this regard; stresses the urgent need for political stability, commitment and credible engagement in consensus-building to move the stagnant EU reform process forward, in particular as regards the urgent rule of law reforms; underlines the importance of continued respect for democratic processes, norms and standards;

6. Welcomes Montenegro's acceptance of the revised enlargement methodology and calls on Montenegro to intensify its efforts in meeting the remaining interim benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24 and thereafter in closing chapters based on measurable progress and tangible results;

7. Welcomes Montenegro's continued full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy, including all of the sanctions adopted following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its support for an international rules-based order at the level of the United Nations; encourages the future government to remain committed in this regard;

8. Commends Montenegro's material and humanitarian support to Ukraine, worth more than EUR 10 million, as well as the temporary protection mechanism, which grants people fleeing from Ukraine the right to stay in Montenegro for one year; recalls that Montenegro is among the Western Balkan countries hosting the highest number of Ukrainian nationals; expresses concern, however, over the fact that increasing numbers of Russian citizens, including oligarchs, are taking up residence in Montenegro; urges the Montenegrin authorities to ensure that the country does not become a hub for entities and individuals wishing to circumvent sanctions;

9. Welcomes Montenegro's active involvement in EU common security and defence policy missions and operations, such as the European Union Naval Force Operation Atalanta, and in NATO and other international and multilateral missions; recognises Montenegro's strategic alliance with the EU and condemns any attempts by competent authorities to question its NATO membership;

10. Remains seriously concerned by malign foreign interference, destabilisation efforts, hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns by foreign actors in Montenegro that present the EU as an unreliable and uninvolved partner and undermine Montenegro's progress on its European path, in particular those originating from Russia, China and Serbia; condemns Russia's efforts to exploit ethnic tensions in Montenegro in order to inflame conflict, divide communities and disseminate deceptive information in a bid to destabilise the entire Western Balkans region; notes that religious institutions can be used as a tool for external influence and strongly condemns any undue interference by the Serbian Orthodox Church in this regard, including its attempts to promote Russia's disinformation;

11. Calls on Montenegro to make significant and systemic efforts towards identifying and dismantling disinformation factories and underlines the importance of media freedom and independence, quality reporting and improving media literacy as key to fighting disinformation; condemns the unprecedented cyberattack of August 2022 against Montenegro's digital infrastructure, as well as past attacks in response to Montenegro's accession to NATO in 2017; urges Montenegro to actively enhance its resilience in this regard in close cooperation with the EU, including via EU-funded cybersecurity tools, such as the Cybersecurity Rapid Response project for Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, and with NATO; welcomes Montenegro's interest in cooperating with the EU via the European Democracy Action Plan; calls for the urgent adoption of the strategy on countering hybrid threats and the relevant action plan, in alignment with EU strategic documents, including the 2022 EU Cyber Defence Policy; calls on the Commission to provide technical and financial assistance in this regard;

12. Calls on the Commission, the European External Action Service and the Delegation of the EU to Montenegro to intensify their efforts to improve the EU's visibility in the country and pursue an active and effective communication campaign on the importance and benefits of a close partnership between Montenegro and the EU, including EU-funded projects and Montenegro's European future; calls for expanding StratCom monitoring to concentrate on cross-border disinformation threats in the Western Balkan countries and their neighbours; emphasises the added value of engaging with local and regional expertise from the private sector and civil society in order to produce evidence-based responses in the fight against disinformation and to identify troubling developments at an early stage;

13. Urges the Commission once again to initiate an independent and impartial investigation into whether the conduct engaged in and the policies furthered by the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement constitute a breach of the Code of Conduct for the Members of the Commission and of the Commission's obligations under the Treaties;

14. Underlines the need for the full respect of the Code of Conduct for the Members of the Commission and of the Commission's obligations under the Treaties;

15. Encourages Montenegro to re-engage in parliamentary cooperation through the Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC); regrets the cancellation of the EU-Montenegro SAPC meeting in December 2022 due to Montenegro's failure to follow the opinion of the Venice Commission with respect to the controversial adoption of the Law on amendments to the Law on the President;

Democracy and the rule of law

16. Regrets the adoption of the controversial Law on amendments to the Law on the President by the Parliament of Montenegro in December 2022, which directly challenged respect for constitutionality and the rule of law, despite the urgent opinion of the Venice Commission and the EU's calls against its adoption; welcomes the Constitutional Court's launch of the procedure for reviewing the law's constitutionality and its recent unanimous decision to overturn the law; underlines the importance of following the Venice Commission's recommendations on matters related to legal provisions and the overall rule of law in the country;

17. Regrets the deep polarisation, lack of dialogue, mistrust and political boycotts in the Montenegrin Parliament that have seriously hampered the legislative process; calls on the legislative and executive branches to strengthen loyal cooperation, including on the accession process; calls for strengthening the functioning and coordination between state institutions in order to achieve political stability and substantial progress in key EU-related reforms, in particular electoral and judicial reforms and the fight against organised crime and corruption;

18. Urges the Montenegrin authorities to implement and adopt necessary measures to strengthen the independence, integrity, efficiency, accountability and professionalism of the judiciary and to combat any form of political interference in the judicial system, in line with rule of law principles and democratic standards;

19. Welcomes the appointment of three new Constitutional Court judges as a step towards resolving the constitutional crisis; regrets the fact that the Constitutional Court was left without a quorum since September 2022; calls on the new parliament to finalise judicial appointments as a matter of utmost priority, in particular the Supreme State Prosecutor, as proposed by the Prosecutorial Council in May 2023, and three members of the Judicial Council;

20. Regrets the lack of progress made on the reform of the electoral, legal and institutional framework, in which gaps and ambiguities persist that undermine its effectiveness and need to be addressed, including but not limited to transparency in the financing of political parties and their election campaigns, the misuse of state funds, the institutional advantage used by ruling parties for political gains and concerns about the accuracy of the voters' registry; calls for the implementation of the outstanding recommendations by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, including with the aim of reforming the entire electoral legislation in line with European standards; notes the work started by the State Election Commission (SEC) to increase its transparency and implement recommendations; encourages the authorities to further strengthen the SEC's integrity, impartiality and accountability in order to improve public trust; urges Montenegro to ensure a credible, independent and effective political and judicial follow-up to the 'envelope affair' case of alleged electoral fraud;

21. Reiterates its call for local-level elections to be held on the same day; welcomes the fact that elections in 14 municipalities were held on the same day in October 2022; notes, however, that amendments to the Law on Self-Government were assessed as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Montenegro; calls for a robust legislative framework in this regard with a particular focus on achieving gender balance among the elected representatives, namely through equal representation for female candidates on electoral lists and improving and enforcing current internal rules in this regard;

22. Notes that the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections were competitive and well-managed overall, and that candidates were able to campaign freely and enjoyed equal opportunities to reach out to voters; regrets, however, the fact that candidate registration was not inclusive and that long-standing shortcomings in the legal framework and campaign finance regulations remain unaddressed; is concerned about the vulnerability of the media to internal and external

influences in terms of campaign coverage and allegations of the misuse of state resources in the pre-electoral period; takes note of the record low voter turnout of 56,4 % in the parliamentary elections;

23. Urges Montenegro to put in place a credible and effective criminal justice response to corruption; notes the improvement in the prevention of corruption and the positive trend in the work of the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, and encourages further strengthening the Agency's integrity, impartiality and accountability to improve its performance and public trust; calls on the authorities to swiftly adopt a coordinated national strategy for the fight against high-level corruption and organised crime in line with Group of States against Corruption recommendations and EU standards and to foster an integrated approach to the prevention and repression of corruption; calls on the authorities to criminalise illicit enrichment;

24. Notes with great concern the serious domestic and international criminal actions by Montenegrin organised crime organisations known as 'clans' and calls for a full investigation into their alleged connection to the political establishment in the country;

25. Notes the efforts being made in the fight against organised crime through legislative changes and the arrest of key figures; takes note of the serious charges being brought against leading figures in the judicial system; notes the rising numbers of final convictions, but remains concerned by the lengthy trials and frequent adjournments; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to strengthen criminal investigations, increase the number of experts in this field, ensure enhanced cooperation and monitoring in the criminal justice system and deliver verdicts promptly, while respecting the right to a fair, independent and impartial trial and safeguarding the rights of the accused; calls for further alignment with the EU *acquis* on asset confiscation;

26. Welcomes the positive efforts made in the area of illicit trade, namely cigarette smuggling; notes the new measures announced by the government in July 2022 prohibiting the storage of tobacco in Bar; reiterates the importance of further measures to tackle cigarette smuggling in the country, especially in the free zone of the Port of Bar;

27. Urges Montenegro to develop a comprehensive strategy to combat human trafficking and protect victims and to ensure close cooperation with regional and international partners; welcomes Montenegro's ongoing cooperation with EU agencies such as Europol and Eurojust and notes the importance of this cooperation in assisting Montenegro with tackling cross-border crime, including the trafficking of weapons, drugs and human beings, and with combating terrorism and extremism;

28. Welcomes the adoption of the new 2022-2026 strategy for public administration reform, but regrets the lack of progress made in implementing it; remains concerned about the lowered requirements for the merit-based recruitment, competence and independence of civil servants and the loss of staff with knowledge of the EU accession process; urges Montenegro to effectively address these shortcomings, optimise state administration, implement managerial accountability and ensure transparency; underlines the importance of recruitment on all levels of public administration based on principles of merit, competence, as well as the de-politicisation of the public service; remains concerned by cases of abuse of office;

29. Welcomes the second Citizens' Assembly in Montenegro and the follow-up visit of its participants to the European Parliament;

Fundamental freedoms and human rights

30. Calls on Montenegro to step up its efforts to combat hate speech, online harassment, which disproportionately affects human rights defenders and women, and politically biased reporting and foreign influence in the Montenegrin media; urges politicians and public figures to vehemently denounce any messages aimed at polarising society and undercutting media trust and fundamental democratic norms; recalls that hate speech incidents against ethnic and sexual minorities, such as incidents against LGBTIQ+ persons, are a matter of grave concern; notes also the slow progress made on freedom of expression;

31. Expresses its concern about the deep political polarisation in the media landscape, the lack of independence of the public broadcaster (Radio and Television of Montenegro – RTCG) and, in particular, the growing volume of foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns that negatively impact democratic processes; notes with concern the pressure being put on the local media market by expanding regional media competition; emphasises the need for media independence and freedom as key elements of a strong democracy; calls on media regulatory bodies and all stakeholders to promote and support initiatives that encourage and foster balanced and unbiased reporting and the representation of different perspectives, as well as investigative journalism, in order to mitigate the impact of political polarisation;

32. Notes the development of RTCG's Development Strategy and Digital Transformation Strategy for the period 2023-2027, which recognises the role of RTCG as the primary source of information; calls on all authorities to refrain from taking any administrative, legislative or political action that would jeopardise the public broadcaster's editorial, institutional or financial independence; expresses concern about the election of RTCG's director-general in violation of a final court decision;

33. Acknowledges the efforts made to complete the Media Strategy of Montenegro 2022-2026 and insists on the inclusion of media and civil society in the revision of media legislation, in line with EU standards; urges Montenegro to finally adopt a new set of media laws, namely a law on media, a law on public media and a law on audio-visual media services;

34. Welcomes some positive steps, such as the introduction of tougher penalties for attacks and threats against journalists, and the establishment of the ad hoc commission for monitoring violence against the media and calls urgently for a renewal of its mandate; reiterates, however, the need for the effective implementation of its findings and recommendations; calls for more transparency regarding classified files concerning attacks against women journalists; urges Montenegro to increase the effectiveness of the legal response to threats and violence against journalists and other media professionals, including past cases, and urges the authorities to refrain from any verbal attacks or undue political pressure on independent media and journalists; emphasises the need to review the investigation of the murder of the journalist Duško Jovanović and to engage with foreign experts to ensure a full and effective investigation;

35. Urges Montenegro to conduct the long-overdue population and housing census in line with EU and international standards as soon as the political stalemate in the country ends, so that this important matter is not used as yet another pretext to enhance the polarisation of society; expects this to be conducted in an open and transparent manner without any political interference, with all recognised national minorities counted properly without fear of intimidation or prosecution;

36. Welcomes the country's multi-ethnic identity and calls for the further promotion of and respect for all languages, cultural heritage and traditions of local communities and national minorities; regrets the fact that societal polarisation and divisions have intensified; emphasises the need to protect the rights of all national minorities, including their political, social and economic rights, and urges for strengthened, applied and implemented institutional and legal frameworks in this regard, including a new anti-discrimination law; calls on the authorities to tackle the intersectional discrimination that minorities face through a systemic and effective institutional approach;

37. Calls on Montenegro to intensify efforts to ensure the non-discriminatory use of minority languages in education and in dedicated media space in state and local outlets; stresses the importance of equal representation of national minorities in the media, the judiciary, law enforcement and public institutions; emphasises the need to protect all of the national minorities' political rights;

38. Regrets that the most vulnerable groups in society, including Roma and Egyptians, persons with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ persons are increasingly subject to discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes; calls on Montenegro to strengthen measures against hate speech, social exclusion and discrimination and to improve vulnerable groups' access to justice, employment, housing and healthcare; recalls the need to fully and effectively implement the 2021-2025 strategy for the inclusion of Roma and Egyptians; deplores the growing violence and hate speech toward LGBTIQ+ people and calls on Montenegro to adopt relevant legislation to fully protect their rights, including the full implementation of the Law on Same-sex Partnership;

39. Underlines the multi-ethnic identity of the Bay of Kotor; stresses that Montenegro's European perspective is closely entwined with the protection of minorities and their cultural heritage; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to nurture the multi-ethnic nature of the state, including the traditions and cultural heritage of the Croatian community in the Bay of Kotor; welcomes the election of the Croatian minority representative to the Parliament of Montenegro in the last elections;

40. Is concerned by the increase in femicides, openly expressed misogyny, gender-based violence and violence against children; remains concerned about sexism directed at women in politics and public life and regrets that violence against women contributes to preventing women from becoming involved in political life; is concerned about the decreasing number of women among the Members of Parliament;

41. Urges Montenegro to implement the standards of the Istanbul Convention, launch public awareness campaigns and ensure that such crimes are properly investigated and the perpetrators prosecuted; calls on Montenegro to eradicate all forms of discrimination, address deeply rooted societal discriminatory behaviours, improve access to justice and ensure better follow-up and enforcement of rights in proceedings on domestic violence, as well as enhanced prevention of and protection against domestic violence and support systems for victims; calls on Montenegro to establish regular monitoring mechanisms to oversee the effectiveness of family justice systems for victims of domestic abuse and introduce monitoring mechanisms to assess the impact of policies and procedures relating to family justice on marginalised groups of women;

42. Expresses concern about the lack of progress made and conflict of interest in the process of drafting amendments to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence; notes that the State Prosecutor, who is suspected of committing domestic violence, was delegated by the State Prosecution Office to the working group of the Ministry of Justice for drafting amendments to the law;

43. Regrets the ongoing prevalence of discrimination against people with disabilities; laments the inconsistency between national laws and the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; calls for the effective implementation of strategies to address the gaps in upholding the rights of people with disabilities across sectors and policies, including healthcare, the labour market and in administrative and judicial proceedings; welcomes the fact that a reform of the National Disability Determination System is underway; stresses the urgent need for a de-institutionalisation strategy;

44. Notes with concern the signing of the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church amid criticism by civil society and political disagreements on the lack of inclusive consultations and transparency; is concerned about attempts by the Orthodox Church in countries such as Serbia and Montenegro to promote Russia as a protector of so-called traditional family values and to fortify relations between the state and the church;

45. Underlines the key role of civil society organisations in functioning democracies; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to better involve civil society, together with independent experts and local stakeholders, in developing key legislation, in particular reforms related to the EU reform agenda and the accession process more generally, by strengthening cooperation and consultation mechanisms between state bodies and civil society organisations (CSOs); notes that funding rules for CSOs have been set up, but only a limited number of ministries have launched calls to award grants to these organisations; notes with concern undue actions by some CSOs; calls on the Montenegrin authorities to ensure that CSOs function in line with democratic standards and EU values; notes, in this context, that full transparency concerning the funding of CSOs would be an important contribution towards ensuring greater transparency; deplores verbal attacks made by state officials against CSOs;

46. Calls on Montenegro to urgently and fully implement the recommendations by the Universal Periodic Review, the Committee Against Torture and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment with a view to combating the climate of impunity in the country; in this context, urges Montenegro to prohibit the statute of limitations for the criminal offences of torture and other forms of ill-treatment and to amend the definition of torture in accordance with the UN Convention Against Torture; calls on the authorities to secure prompt and effective investigations of cases of police violence and torture against detainees and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice; calls for perpetrators of torture to be immediately suspended from duty pending an investigation and to receive penalties commensurate with the seriousness of their actions if found guilty;

47. Acknowledges the signing of an upgraded agreement between the EU and Montenegro on operational cooperation in border management with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), which entered into force provisionally on 1 July 2023; encourages further cooperation between Montenegro and Frontex in order to strengthen border management, support asylum procedures, fight smuggling and enhance readmission;

Reconciliation, regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations

48. Notes Montenegro's active participation in regional cooperation and emphasises the importance of addressing shared challenges, promoting good neighbourly relations and advancing regional stability and development; praises Montenegro for respecting minority rights and assuming a positive role in regional relations and encourages it to step up its reconciliation efforts and seek solutions to past disputes;

49. Underscores the importance of inclusive economic cooperation that should be acceptable to all six Western Balkan countries, which establishes cooperation where they all have an equal footing and that fosters deeper adherence to EU norms and the *acquis*; recalls, in this regard, its hesitation concerning the Open Balkan initiative and notes Montenegro's participation in the June and September summits as an observer;

50. Welcomes the recent agreements in the context of the Berlin Process on the freedom of movement with identity cards, on the recognition of higher education qualifications and on the recognition of professional qualifications for doctors of medicine, dentists and architects; calls for their rapid adoption and implementation and commends their ratification by the Montenegrin Government; stresses the importance of making full use of all the regional and intergovernmental initiatives that are already in place, in particular the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, the Central-European Initiative, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region and the Berlin Process, and of creating synergies between them;

51. Urges Montenegro to step up efforts to identify, prosecute and punish war crimes and their glorification while also clarifying the fate of missing persons; calls on Montenegro to proactively investigate all war crime allegations and raise issues of command responsibility, aiding and abetting; calls, in this context, for effective regional cooperation in the investigation and prosecution of persons indicted for war crimes; commends Montenegro's continued cooperation under the Sarajevo Declaration process; urges the authorities to review old cases that were not prosecuted in line with international humanitarian law or domestic law and ensure that all victims and their family members obtain redress and/or administrative compensation for their suffering; regrets that many challenges persist with regard to their economic and social integration and well-being;

52. Is concerned about the dissolved Montenegrin Parliament's adoption of the Law on Veterans and Disability Protection, which selectively prescribes the category of 'civilian victims of war' and their right to monetary compensation, despite the fact that this law has not yet taken effect;

53. Calls on Montenegro to comply with provisions on succession to the former Social Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, especially as regards military assets;

54. Calls for concrete steps to be taken by Montenegro and its neighbours to resolve long-standing bilateral disputes in a constructive and neighbourly manner, including the unresolved border demarcation issues with Serbia and Croatia, as early as possible during the accession process; encourages the promotion of cross-border initiatives, including the EU co-financed Cross-Border Cooperation Programme between Serbia and Montenegro;

55. Reiterates its call to open the archives that concern the former republics of Yugoslavia and for access to be granted to the files of the former Yugoslav Secret Service and the Yugoslav People's Army Secret Service in order to thoroughly research and address communist era crimes;

Socio-economic reforms

56. Positively notes the reported budget surplus for the first quarter of 2023 and the projected economic growth in 2024; welcomes the easing of the inflation rate, but notes that it remains one of the highest in Europe;

57. Encourages Montenegro to adjust its economic growth strategy in order to boost productivity and human capital and to accelerate its convergence with the EU as advised by the World Bank and in order to benefit all segments of society, including marginalised and vulnerable groups; reiterates the need for increased public investment in the education system for sustainable social and economic development;

58. Notes the decrease in Montenegro's public debt, but remains highly concerned by debt-related vulnerabilities; calls on Montenegro to take further steps towards the sustainability of public finances and to develop measures to reduce the informal economy;

59. Calls on Montenegro to enhance its fiscal economic policies in order to align its public debt levels with the target set by the EU's Stability and Growth Pact, ensuring they do not exceed 60 % of GDP; urges Montenegro to strengthen its foreign investment screening mechanism to enhance economic security, prevent political interference and address issues concerning bad governance; emphasises the importance of improving the sustainability of its exports by reducing overreliance on extractive industries, such as copper ore and raw aluminium extraction;

60. Notes the increase in Montenegro's public debt to foreign financial institutions and companies that can be used as a tool to influence its foreign policy decisions, in particular those related to China; 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; notes with concern the signing of a memorandum of understanding with a Chinese consortium to build a highway connecting Budva and Tivat, bearing in mind Montenegro's previous indebtedness to China, namely the USD 1 billion loan used to build the Bar-Boljare highway; calls on the authorities to reduce economic dependence on China and welcomes recent efforts made towards decreasing these fiscal vulnerabilities; calls on Montenegro to continue making use of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the EU Global Gateway Initiative with a view to finding greener and more transparent alternatives for financing infrastructure projects;

61. Calls on the Montenegrin authorities to take further steps to implement digital services for micro, small and medium enterprises, prioritise the development of transactional electronic services and implement the strategy for digitalisation in the educational system; recognises the significance of investing in education and vocational training to address youth unemployment and promote economic growth and social cohesion in Montenegro;

62. Welcomes Montenegro's decision to terminate its citizenship by investment programme on 31 December 2022; notes that between 2019 and 2022 more than 70 % of these passports issued were granted to citizens of the Russian Federation; calls on the authorities to review past decisions, especially in the light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine; underscores the security, corruption and money laundering risks such schemes can bring; emphasises, furthermore, the need for further alignment with EU visa policy;

63. Encourages Montenegro to make the best use of the EU funds available under the IPA III and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, including the Western Balkans Investment Framework, the Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans and the Erasmus+ programme; stresses that, in line with IPA III conditionality, funding must be modulated or suspended in the event of a significant regression or persistent lack of progress on fundamentals;

64. Calls on the EU and the Western Balkan countries to establish a framework for effective cooperation with the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO); calls on the Commission to make the necessary legal and political arrangements to extend the jurisdiction of the EPPO to EU funds devoted to Montenegro as a candidate country; encourages the Western Balkan countries to swiftly conclude bilateral working arrangements with the EPPO in order to facilitate close cooperation and prosecution for the misuse of EU funds, including through the secondment of national liaison officers to the EPPO;

65. Reiterates its call for the Commission to implement the recommendations of special report 01/2022 of the European Court of Auditors and thus adapt its investments related to the rule of law in the Western Balkans, including in Montenegro;

Energy, the environment, biodiversity, sustainable development and connectivity

66. Welcomes the Commission's energy support package for the Western Balkans and underlines the utmost importance of designating emergency support package funds to relieve the effects of the energy crisis and support Montenegro's transition towards an energy-efficient and renewable-energy-based economy, in line with the REpowerEU plan;

67. Welcomes the launch of the day-ahead electricity market at the Montenegrin Power Exchange, which makes the market more liquid and transparent to the benefit of both consumers and producers, ensuring fair prices, more secure and reliable supply and the greater integration of renewable energy; calls on Montenegro to better integrate with EU Member States' energy markets and to boost the implementation of energy efficiency measures in conjunction with facilitating the deployment of renewable energy with a view to transitioning away from fossil fuels;

68. Calls on Montenegro to accelerate its sustainable energy transition in line with the Paris Agreement and EU decarbonisation goals; underlines that all new renewable energy projects must comply with the EU *acquis* on concessions, State aid and the environment; calls on the authorities to speed up the process of developing the Montenegro General Spatial Plan, which should be developed based on the public interest in a transparent manner and apply to all new energy projects; highlights the need to effectively transpose and implement the revised clean energy for all Europeans package; expresses deep concerns about the changes introduced to the Law on Industrial Emissions and the consequent extension of the operation of the Pljevlja coal power plant, despite the ongoing infringement procedure launched by the Energy Community Secretariat in view of the breach of the Large Combustion Plant Directive under the Energy Community Treaty; calls on Montenegro to remedy this without delay; notes the start of the plant's ecological reconstruction worth EUR 70 million;

69. Notes the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Montenegro and the US while work is advancing to install a liquefied natural gas terminal in the port of Bar; expects Montenegro to commit to diversifying energy supply and enhancing energy security;

70. Calls on Montenegro to step up the development and adoption of a coherent and credible national energy and climate plan, in line with the EU's climate and energy policy framework; encourages Montenegro to adopt amendments to the Law on Protection against the Negative Impacts of Climate Change; calls on Montenegro to improve waste management practices and to protect water quality;

71. Underlines the importance for Montenegro's infrastructure investments to comply with the EU standards in the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive and for respecting EU public procurement and State aid rules; deeply regrets the damage to the Tara River Basin Biosphere Reserve and the Durmitor National Park UNESCO heritage site linked to the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway; reiterates its calls on Montenegro to implement riverbed revitalisation measures and closely monitor the environmental impact of transport infrastructure construction;

72. Reiterates its call on Montenegro to take urgent measures to effectively conserve protected areas and encourages it to continue identifying potential Natura 2000 sites; underlines the need to ensure compliance with the Habitats Directive and the Water Framework Directive when undertaking new investments that may affect potential Natura 2000 or Emerald sites, including Lake Skadar, Sinjajevina, Komarnica and others, or that may result in a deterioration of the status of water bodies; shares serious concerns expressed by Montenegrin citizens and civic activists that the Komarnica River Canyon might be irreversibly devastated by the construction of a dam for a hydropower plant and calls on the authorities to conduct a detailed cost-benefit analysis on its viability and existing alternatives;

73. Encourages Montenegro to step up action on institutional and legislative reforms regarding hunting and fishing, with a particular focus on protected areas and protected species; urges the Montenegrin authorities, against this backdrop, to enforce effective, dissuasive and proportionate penalties for all environmental offences and to root out corruption in this sector;

74. Welcomes the Tirana Summit agreement on reducing roaming costs between the EU and the Western Balkans from 1 October 2023 with a view to full removal thereafter; welcomes the agreement of 3 May 2023 between 38 telecommunication operators from the EU and the Western Balkans to reduce the costs of data roaming; calls on the authorities, private actors and all stakeholders to facilitate reaching the agreed targets to achieve a substantial reduction in roaming charges for data exchange;

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75. 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, Government and Parliament of Montenegro.
