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Montenegro's EU accession: A confidence-building tutorial for the Union

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INTRODUCTION

Montenegro's accession would be a low-risk, high-impact way for the EU to prove its credibility and capacity to deliver enlargement – strengthening trust in its leadership at a time of geopolitical uncertainty.

There is no growth without discomfort, no credibility without keeping one's promises and no leadership without competence. To navigate the present geopolitical storms and prepare for future shocks, the European Union must come of age, mend its reputation and dust off its mantle. The task ahead is daunting, matching the weight of the *permapolycrisis*,¹ and will demand sustained effort across policy fields and decision-making levels.

Yet strategic wins can make the challenge less formidable. One such opportunity is Montenegro's accession before the end of the current politico-institutional cycle. By investing the needed political and technical capital to see the country join the Union by 2029, the EU would demonstrate that it can step outside its comfort zone, honour its commitments and act with purpose – rehearsing, in essence, the confident and competent leadership it will need in the years to come.

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BACKGROUND: INTEGRATION THROUGH UNCERTAINTY

European integration has always advanced through a delicate balance of ambition and restraint. Every milestone – from the Single Market to Monetary Union and successive enlargements – demanded political imagination and the courage to move forward despite uncertainty.

Progress has rarely emerged from consensus alone. It has often depended on bold decisions that carried real risk. Creating common institutions, pooling sovereignty and welcoming new members were deliberate choices taken by EU countries in imperfect circumstances. None was inevitable or uncontested, yet all shaped the Union's capacity to lead. Their success rested less on technical readiness than on the political will to act collectively amid complexity.

The boundary between domestic and external policy has blurred, intertwining questions of institutional design, credibility and global influence.

This tradition of decision through uncertainty continues to shape the trajectory of European integration. As the external environment grows more volatile – marked by shifting alliances, economic interdependence, technological disruption and renewed security competition – the link between internal consolidation and external projection has grown stronger. The boundary between domestic and external policy has blurred, intertwining questions of institutional design, credibility and global influence.

Enlargement between ambition and restraint

Enlargement occupies a special place within the broader logic of European integration. It has long served as a mechanism through which internal stability and external transformation reinforce one another. Every wave of enlargement has tested the Union's confidence, but in hindsight, each proved a strategically sound act of political vision. Subsequent waves combined pragmatism with purpose, showing how integration deepens through inclusion.

In the two decades preceding Russia's war in Ukraine, however, the enlargement dossier stagnated. Political hesitation among member states often outweighed the commitments made to prospective members, even as conditionality grew more detailed and demanding. The credibility of the EU's transformative power thus came to rest as much on consistency as on capacity.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reawakened the geopolitical dimension of enlargement. Candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova, renewed engagement with the Western Balkans and fresh attention to the neighbourhood injected momentum not seen in years. Enlargement once again became a vehicle for articulating Europe's role in a contested international order – and reaffirming its commitment to a stable, democratic continent.

Delivering enlargement, however, is the true measure of that intent. The Union's credibility rests not on declarations of strategic necessity but on its ability to act upon them. Among current candidates, Montenegro offers the clearest opportunity to turn rhetoric into tangible progress. Since opening accession talks in 2012, the country has built a solid reform record and presents a manageable, merit-based test of the EU's capacity to act decisively, especially compared to the more complex, long-term challenges on the eastern flank.

How the EU responds will shape not only Montenegro's future but also that of the wider Western Balkans, the credibility of enlargement policy and the Union's ability to exercise leadership commensurate with its global responsibilities.

STATE OF PLAY

The frontrunner

Montenegro remains the most advanced EU candidate, with all 33 negotiation chapters opened and seven provisionally closed. In June 2024, the European Commission's positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) confirmed that the country had met key rule-of-law benchmarks under Chapters 23 and 24 – the first candidate to do so – marking a decisive step towards the final stage of negotiations.

The government has adopted wide-ranging judicial and anti-corruption reforms, including amendments to laws on the judiciary, elections and media freedom. These

measures address earlier EU concerns about institutional independence and transparency and are being monitored through enhanced oversight mechanisms.²

Building on this progress, Montenegro aims³ to close five additional negotiation chapters – on agriculture, fisheries, free movement of capital, commercial law and the right of establishment and freedom to provide services – by the end of 2025. Achieving this would bring the total number of closed chapters to 12 – a threshold deemed sufficient for the Council to establish a working group for Montenegro's Accession Treaty.

Economically, Montenegro benefits from relative stability.⁴ GDP growth has remained above the Western Balkans average, inflation has eased from post-pandemic highs and public debt is declining. Compared with its neighbours, Montenegro enjoys higher levels of trade and financial integration with the EU, reflecting the depth of its economic alignment. The use of euro as legal tender underpins its monetary stability and facilitates its access to EU markets.

The Reform Agenda for Growth, developed alongside the EU's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, further harmonises national policies with single-market principles and the twin green and digital transitions. Montenegro currently holds the highest⁵ regional reform implementation score (88%) under the Growth Plan.

With over 60% of its electricity generated from renewables, Montenegro leads⁶ the region in the energy transition. New legislation on energy efficiency, market modernisation and cross-border interconnections with Italy further demonstrate its policy convergence with EU standards.

Public support⁷ for EU membership remains among the highest in the region, consistently around 70-75%. Despite political fragmentation, major parties continue to share this goal, enabling reforms to proceed even amid coalition volatility.

...and its ongoing hurdles

Several areas remain work in progress. The independence of the judiciary has improved on paper but continues to face capacity and enforcement gaps. Progress on high-level corruption and media freedom is partial, while public-administration reform struggles with politicisation in senior appointments. Implementation often trails legislation, limiting the impact of reforms on public trust and institutional performance.

Frequent changes of government since 2020 have undermined political stability and institutional memory. However, the formation of the current government in 2023, which enjoys a two-thirds parliamentary majority to date, has begun to restore predictability.

As a NATO member since 2017, Montenegro is firmly anchored into the Euro-Atlantic security framework. It fully aligns with the EU's Common Foreign and

Security Policy (CFSP), including all sanctions regimes, and actively participates in the Berlin Process and regional connectivity frameworks. Yet tensions⁸ with neighbouring Croatia – particularly over border demarcation and property disputes – persist, while external actors continue to exert pressure through political, religious and media channels.

The toils of enlargement

At the EU level, enlargement remains defined by procedural management⁹ and political caution. Revisions of the enlargement methodology were meant to make the process more political and credible, yet in practice they have entrenched a highly controlled, incremental approach. Technical assessments and cluster-based monitoring improved thematic coherence but failed to accelerate political decision-making.

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Within the Council, unanimity continues to shape every major step – from the opening and closing of negotiation clusters to the final accession decision. Member states’ divergent sensitivities on governance, migration and fiscal policy sustain a cautious stance on admitting new members. The recent failure¹⁰ of European Council President Antonio Costa’s proposal to extend qualified majority voting to parts of the underscores how deeply unanimity remains embedded in the EU’s institutional logic. As a result, the pace of enlargement continues to reflect internal EU dynamics more than candidates’ performance – progressively chipping away at the policy’s credibility and transformative appeal.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s political guidelines for 2024–2029 describe enlargement as a “moral, political and geostrategic imperative” and reaffirm its merit-based nature.¹¹ The European Council’s Strategic Agenda echoes this language, pledging to “follow a merit-based approach to accession” and to “undertake the necessary internal reforms”¹² to welcome new members.

The EU risks being trapped in its own cautious orthodoxy – eroding its credibility and leadership precisely when they matter most.

The internal reform debate has gained visibility but little traction.¹³ The prospect of a Union of 30+ members raises legitimate questions about decision-making efficiency, fiscal solidarity and institutional balance, yet consensus on how to adapt remains elusive. Across the Union, there is broad recognition that widening and deepening must advance together, but little clarity on how to operationalise this twin agenda.

The Commission’s long-promised pre-enlargement policy reviews, intended to outline how the EU should prepare for future accessions, have been repeatedly postponed since their announcement in March 2025, now rescheduled for later this month.¹⁴ The delay reflects divisions among member states: some view institutional reform, including potential changes to voting procedures or budgetary frameworks, as a prerequisite for enlargement; others see the two processes as mutually reinforcing. The absence of agreement has created a holding pattern in which enlargement is recognised as strategically vital but politically deferred.

Moreover, the way enlargement is now framed – as time-sensitive, merit-based and ‘digestible’ for the Union – sets an ambition that is difficult to deliver. The geopolitical urgency of enlargement has outpaced both the slow yield of accession conditionality and member states’ chronic hesitance to advance overdue internal reforms.

When everything is a priority yet the methods remain unchanged, progress stalls on all fronts. The EU risks being trapped in its own cautious orthodoxy – eroding its credibility and leadership precisely when they matter most. From this perspective, Montenegro’s accession, if delivered, could be a gamechanger – proving that the EU can still lead with courage and purpose.

PROSPECTS

Growth through discomfort

Widening has always tested the Union’s capacity for cohesion and its appetite for leadership. The next enlargement will be no exception. Bringing Montenegro into the EU would compel the Union to move beyond the comfort of procedural incrementalism and rediscover the political vocation of integration. To remain relevant amid today’s geopolitical turmoil and prepare for an

uncertain future, the EU must show the courage to act beyond caution, the credibility to keep its word and the competence to manage change – the hallmarks of political maturity.

Montenegro offers the Union a low-risk but high-impact opportunity to meet the moment. The test is not one of capacity but of confidence. With just 600,000 inhabitants and a GDP of €5.8 billion (around 0.034% of the EU-27 total), Montenegro's accession would have a negligible fiscal and institutional footprint. Integrating its economy into the Single Market, assigning one Commissioner, redistributing a few European Parliament seats and adding a chair to the Council table are well within the Union's means.

The real challenge, therefore, is political rather than technical. It requires member states to trade risk aversion for resolve. The EU should treat Montenegro's accession as an opportunity to strengthen its institutional readiness in a measured way – improving inter-institutional coordination and updating procedural practices – without making internal EU reform a precondition for progress. This would demonstrate that the Union can learn by doing and take responsibility for its own evolution.

In practical terms, before the end of the year, the Danish Council Presidency should establish a dedicated Working Group to prepare Montenegro's Accession Treaty. Doing so would set the political process in motion and send a signal of renewed commitment – to Podgorica, to the Western Balkans and to other candidate countries.

Credibility through delivery

Since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the Western Balkans' path to the EU has narrowed, milestones have multiplied and political energy has dissipated. Completing Montenegro's accession would allow the Union to honour a two-decade-old pledge and restore the credibility of enlargement. It could also reopen political and public space for further accessions to the EU.

For the Western Balkans, this would prove that the EU keeps its word. For Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, it would show that enlargement is not symbolic but deliverable. For all candidates, it would reaffirm that patience and reform pay off, as one would expect in a merit-based process.

The Council should therefore set a time-bound political objective: Montenegro's accession by 2029, formally endorsed at the highest level.

Yet one accession alone, while rekindling hope, will not dispel doubts about the policy's fairness unless it is embedded in a credible roadmap for subsequent waves. The Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (ENEST) should lead the drafting of an EU Enlargement Roadmap¹⁵ with clear milestones, dedicated resources and realistic timelines for both Western Balkan and Eastern partners.

Ratification also warrants early attention. Some member states may require referenda to approve new accessions. The Commissioner for Enlargement, together with the Presidents of the Commission and European Council, should engage early with national leaders and parliaments to build cross-party and public support. In Montenegro's case, constructive relations with Croatia will be essential. A Confidence Clause¹⁶ could be attached to Montenegro's Accession Treaty to guarantee that, once inside, Podgorica will not obstruct its neighbours' accessions.

Finally, the Union should invest in strategic communication and public outreach to raise public support. A European Forum on Enlargement¹⁷ could anchor a continent-wide conversation on the benefits of widening, helping to rebuild trust among EU-27 and candidate societies alike.

Enlargement and internal reform: twin imperatives

Integrating Montenegro would also require EU to embed enlargement within its ongoing reflection on institutional and rule-of-law reform. The two are not competing but complementary processes: each new accession compels the Union to recalibrate its governance, financial solidarity and representational balance.

The Enlargement Roadmap should therefore be paired with a Comprehensive EU Reform Plan¹⁸ to guide gradual yet concrete adaptations of the Union's operating system to the needs of a larger membership. Linking deepening and widening in this way would ensure that both proceed and reinforce one another. The European Council should mandate the Commission and Council Secretariat to prepare this roadmap, identifying procedural and governance adjustments tailored to small-state accessions. Lessons from Montenegro's experience should inform the design of future enlargements.

Montenegro's membership would not lower the bar but modernise how it is applied: replacing a binary 'inside/outside' logic with a system of continuous monitoring, support and accountability. It would show that the EU can grow while protecting its democratic foundations.

Although Montenegro's accession would be institutionally straightforward, it could help the EU refine post-accession conditionality¹⁹ – strengthening its capacity to uphold democratic standards and rule-of-law compliance within its ranks. Experience shows that democratic resilience is not achieved at entry but maintained through vigilance.

Admitting a candidate that still faces institutional fragility would allow the EU to test and improve its accountability instruments – from the Rule of Law Report to the budgetary conditionality mechanism.

In this sense, Montenegro's membership would not lower the bar but modernise how it is applied: replacing a binary 'inside/outside' logic with a system of continuous monitoring, support and accountability. It would show that the EU can grow while protecting its democratic foundations – a sign of maturity rather than risk.

At the same time, enlargement can serve as a political rehearsal for the Union's broader transformation. Absorbing Montenegro will demand closer coordination among the Commission, Council and Parliament, strengthening inter-institutional discipline and with national capitals. If some governments continue to block deeper integration or enlargement, a coalition of the willing and able should explore cooperation through an *Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde* (OSGA)²⁰ – a coalition operating outside the EU framework yet loyal to the community method and institutional integrity.

Montenegro's part

Montenegro also bears its share of responsibility. Sustaining reform momentum – especially in the judiciary, public administration and anti-corruption – will determine whether membership becomes reality. As negotiations reach their final stage, implementation rather than legislation will define success. Continued cooperation with the EU's rule-of-law missions, transparent monitoring of judicial appointments and steady progress on high-level corruption cases are essential to convince member states that reforms are irreversible.

To make 2029 a realistic accession date, Montenegro should aim to close all negotiation chapters by 2027. This will allow 18–24 months for member states to complete ratification and make the final stretch less dependent on the country's parliamentary elections planned for June 2027.

Maintaining political stability will be equally critical. After years of government turnover, building durable coalitions around the European agenda and insulating the accession process from day-to-day politics will ensure that Montenegro remains a predictable partner in the closing phase.

The EU should continue providing targeted assistance for Montenegro's institutional capacity through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) and support the country's implementation of reforms identified in the IBAR.

Leadership as a deliberate choice

Montenegro's accession would not revolutionise the Union, but it would prove that the EU can still act with purpose. By admitting a country that meets its obligations, the Union would move beyond procedural caution, honour a long-standing promise and revive the habit of strategic adaptation. Each of these steps is essential to rebuild the credibility, competence and confidence that European leadership requires in the age of permacrisis.

Ultimately, the question is less about Montenegro than about the Union's own readiness to lead. In an era marked by war, democratic erosion and global competition, the political courage to welcome a deserving candidate would signal Europe's re-emergence as a confident, self-aware geopolitical actor – one capable of growing through discomfort and leading by example.

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