

Montenegro's European Moment: Towards the Final Stretch

Introduction

On July 9, 2026, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a regional roundtable in Podgorica, Montenegro. The meeting brought together political party representatives, government officials, diplomats, civil society representatives, and regional experts from Montenegro, its neighboring countries, EU member states and the UK to assess Montenegro's prospects for completing EU accession negotiations and to identify the domestic and external steps needed during the final stage of the process. Participants took part in their personal capacities. The roundtable was organized as part of a CIG regional project supported by the German Federal Foreign Office (AA).

The discussion was structured around three dimensions: the domestic political responsibility required to preserve reform momentum; the role of the EU, its Member States, neighboring countries, and other partners; and a practical roadmap for the upcoming period. Particular attention was devoted to rule-of-law reforms, political consensus, bilateral disputes, strategic communication, foreign interference, economic adjustment, and the regional implications of Montenegro's potential accession.

This report summarizes the principal themes, arguments, and recommendations that emerged during the discussion. The roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House Rule. The report was prepared by Mirjana Djordjevic, CIG Associate, and Igor Novakovic, CIG Senior Adviser.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A substantial number of conclusions and recommendations emerged from the discussion:

- Montenegro has a credible but time-sensitive opportunity to complete accession negotiations. However, technical progress alone will not guarantee membership. The final stage will be increasingly political and will require sustained domestic reform, careful diplomacy, and active support from EU Member States.
- The government and opposition should protect EU accession as a common national objective throughout the 2027 election cycle. Political competition should continue, but identity disputes, institutional blockages, and short-term party interests should not be allowed to derail reforms or the ratification process.
- Priority should be given to measurable implementation in the rule-of-law field, including institutional accountability, judicial appointments, electoral integrity, oversight of the security

sector, and safeguards against the political misuse of public institutions and the public broadcaster.

- Montenegro and Croatia should intensify structured, continuous, and high-level dialogue on outstanding bilateral questions. Legitimate disputes should be addressed through diplomacy and dialogue, but they should not be allowed to suspend the wider reform process indefinitely or hamper Montenegro's EU accession. Bilateral disputes should not outweigh the EU's broader strategic interest in the region.

The EU should develop a more transparent and predictable approach to bilateral disputes in enlargement processes. A parallel, clearly defined, and time-bound track could allow negotiations and reforms to proceed while bilateral issues are addressed separately.

- EU political support must be matched by institutional and financial preparation, including the final adoption of adequate provisions in the next Multiannual Financial Framework, early drafting of the Accession Treaty, and clear communication with national parliaments and publics in Member States.

Montenegro should treat public administration capacity, media freedom, and institutional independence as central accession priorities. Particular attention should be given to merit-based recruitment, reducing reliance on acting and temporary appointments, completing public administration reform, strengthening administrative continuity, protecting the independence and professionalism of the public broadcaster, reinforcing the independence and capacity of media regulators, aligning with the European Media Freedom Act, and preventing political pressure on public institutions and independent oversight bodies.

- Montenegro should prepare citizens, businesses, and public institutions for the practical implications of membership. This includes single-market rules, project preparation for cohesion funding, visa-policy alignment, administrative training, and safeguards for vulnerable economic sectors such as tourism.
- Strategic communication should focus on tangible outcomes, including improved functioning of national institutions, better public services, increased mobility, infrastructure development, employment opportunities, and anti-corruption results rather than on negotiating chapters alone. Journalists, civil society, parliament, and regional networks should be treated as active partners in this effort.
- The authorities and partners should prepare for foreign information manipulation and interference, polarizing narratives, and anti-EU campaigns ahead of the elections. Digital literacy, credible public information, and rapid responses to disinformation will be essential.
- The EU and Montenegro should prepare early for possible safeguard arrangements or transitional provisions that may be included in future enlargement decisions. Any such mechanisms should be transparent, proportionate, and clearly linked to objective concerns such as rule-of-law backsliding, media freedom, foreign-policy alignment, budgetary decisions, and the functioning of EU institutions. They should not become a substitute for membership or a new form of open-ended conditionality.
- Montenegro's accession would have significance far beyond its size. A successful, merit-based outcome could restore confidence in enlargement, encourage reform-oriented actors elsewhere in the Western Balkans, and strengthen the EU's geopolitical credibility. It would send an encouraging message of enormous importance not only to the rest of the Western Balkans, but also to other candidate countries, in particular to Moldova and Ukraine.

Key Takeaways from the Discussion

Montenegro's Accession Window: A Credible Opportunity, a Political Endgame

Participants generally agreed that Montenegro is closer to EU membership than any other Western Balkan candidate and that the current moment is unusually favorable for Podgorica's accession bid. Renewed trust from Brussels and key EU capitals was attributed to stronger political will, visible reform progress, and the decision by a broad range of domestic actors, both from the ruling parties and the opposition, to treat accession as a national interest. The preparation of the Accession Treaty and discussions on future EU budgetary arrangements were cited as signs that the Union is beginning to plan more concretely for Montenegro's membership. Several participants therefore emphasized that the EU should prepare institutionally for enlargement alongside candidate countries, noting that readiness is required on both sides.

At the same time, the final phase was described as more politically demanding than the earlier technical stages. Several participants, including from the EU Member States, stressed that the adoption of legislation must now be followed by credible implementation, particularly in the areas of rule of law, institutional accountability, electoral integrity, security-sector oversight, and the independence of public institutions. Recent agreements between the ruling majority and the opposition were welcomed, but one participant coming from civil society cautioned that the need for external mediation on sensitive issues showed that consensus remained fragile rather than fully consolidated.

The 2027 elections were identified as the principal domestic stress test. Concerns included the return of identity politics, nationalist rhetoric, hate speech, foreign information manipulation and interference, and attempts to use EU-related decisions for electoral mobilization. Several participants emphasized that EU membership should not be presented as the achievement of a single party or government. Its success will depend on political discipline across the spectrum and on cooperation with civil society and independent institutions.

Another recurring theme was the need to prepare society for membership. Accession will bring new regulatory obligations and economic opportunities, including access to the single market and cohesion funding. A participant coming from the expert community argued that businesses and public institutions should begin adjusting now, while project pipelines and administrative capacities should be strengthened. Public communication should also acknowledge transitional costs and constraints, rather than presenting membership as an automatic solution to domestic problems.

EU Support, Bilateral Risks, and Economic Readiness

Participants called for clear political support from the EU and its Member States, not only general encouragement. Montenegro will need continued technical assistance, diplomatic engagement, and early intervention when political risks arise. The importance of support from QUINT members and regional partners was repeatedly underlined. Several speakers also stressed that EU leaders must explain the strategic benefits of enlargement to their own citizens, as final accession will require unanimous decisions and ratification by national parliaments.

Relations with Croatia were widely regarded as the most immediate external risk. Outstanding questions linked to minority rights, historical memory, wartime responsibility, maritime issues, and other bilateral concerns were recognized as politically and emotionally sensitive. Participants

differed in their assessment of the likelihood and duration of a Croatian blockage related to Chapter 31, but there was broad agreement that these matters should be addressed early and through sustained political dialogue. Croatia's own experience with Slovenia and the Bulgaria–North Macedonia dispute were cited as evidence of how bilateral questions can become embedded in accession negotiations.

A participant coming from a neighboring country proposed a more structured EU mechanism for handling such disputes. The objective would be to preserve the merit-based character of enlargement by separating legitimate bilateral negotiations from the assessment of accession criteria. International-law instruments, including mediation, arbitration, or adjudication could be used where direct diplomacy does not produce results. Several others agreed with this view, noting that “outstanding issues will not become smaller, but bigger.” A participant coming from an EU Member State argued that Croatia's experience with Slovenia was instructive and that the most likely solution would be a bilateral agreement signed before the ratification process. In this assessment, a structural Croatian veto is unlikely, but Podgorica will probably have to accept some demands from Zagreb.

Some participants also argued that a successful future referendum on EU membership in Iceland could improve the political environment for Montenegro's ratification. If Montenegro's accession were accompanied by another enlargement case, they suggested, this could increase the chances of a successful ratification process and strengthen the broader case for EU enlargement, including for other candidate countries.

Economic vulnerability was another major concern. Montenegro's dependence on tourism, investment from a limited number of markets, weak air transport connectivity, and insufficient economic diversification could complicate alignment with the EU visa regime and foreign-policy requirements. Participants supported gradual and predictable implementation, objectively justified transitional arrangements where needed, and stronger investment in connectivity, sustainable tourism, transport infrastructure, and transparent, high-quality foreign investment. These adjustments were presented not as reasons to delay accession, but as issues requiring early planning and targeted EU support.

Delivering the Final Stretch: Consensus, Implementation, and Public Communication

Participants identified the preservation of domestic political consensus as the central condition for successfully completing the accession process. They stressed that the government and opposition should maintain coordination on essential EU-related reforms, especially the anticipated constitutional amendments, as the 2027 election campaign approaches. Political competition was considered legitimate and unavoidable, but participants warned that it should not be allowed to revive identity-based divisions, obstruct institutional decisions, or transform EU accession into a partisan achievement.

Numerous participants from Montenegro and the EU also emphasized that Montenegro must demonstrate concrete implementation, rather than rely primarily on the adoption of legislation or the formal closure of chapters. Priority areas included the rule of law, judicial and institutional accountability, electoral integrity, oversight of the security sector, the functioning of independent institutions, and continued alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy. Several

participants underlined that the credibility of the final phase will depend on citizens and EU Member States seeing tangible reform results.

A further key message was that Montenegro and its partners need a substantially stronger communication effort. Accession should be explained through its practical effects on citizens, such as stronger institutions, reduced corruption, improved infrastructure and public services, greater mobility, employment opportunities, and access to the single market and EU funds, rather than through technical references to chapters and negotiating procedures. Participants recommended involving journalists, civil society organizations, parliaments, and regional networks as active communicators, while using social media and other channels to reach audiences exposed to anti-EU and disinformation narratives.

Montenegro should complete the remaining technical obligations, prepare its administration, businesses, and project pipelines for membership, and address sensitive bilateral issues through sustained diplomacy. At the same time, the EU and key partners were urged to provide timely political backing, targeted technical and financial support, and early diplomatic engagement where bilateral or domestic risks could jeopardize progress. Participants broadly agreed that Montenegro's accession would be a positive regional development: it could demonstrate that merit-based reforms lead to membership, strengthen pro-European constituencies across the Western Balkans, and restore credibility to the EU's enlargement policy.

Participants

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Ditmir Bushati, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania; Member of Presidency, Socialist Party of Albania

Mirjana Djordjevic, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

Jovana Dragovic, Member of Governing Board and President of the Women's Association, Movement Europe Now; Advisor to Minister without Portfolio, Government of Montenegro

Petar Draskovic, State Secretary, Ministry of Tourism of Montenegro; New Serbian Democracy

Maida Gorcevic, Minister of European Affairs of Montenegro; Member of Presidency, Movement Europe Now

Simonida Kordic, Minister for Tourism of Montenegro; Member, Presidency, New Serbian Democracy

Robert Kozma, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Green Left Front

Remzi Lani, Executive Director, Albanian Media Institute

Jeta Loshaj, Senior Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

Andreina Marsella, Ambassador of Italy to Montenegro

Anne-Marie Maskay, Ambassador of France to Montenegro

Dawn McKen, Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Montenegro

Tanja Miscevic, former Minister of European Integration of Serbia

Igor Novakovic, Senior Adviser, Council for Inclusive Governance

Ivana Penava, Senior Advisor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Croat Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ivan Racan, Member of Parliament of Croatia, Social Democratic Party

Niels von Redecker, Head of Division, the Western Balkans, German Federal Foreign Office

Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Besnik Tahiri, Vice President, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo; Member of Parliament of Kosovo

Nemanja Todorovic Stiplija, Editor-in-Chief, European Western Balkans (Serbia)

Daliborka Uljarevic, Executive Director, Center for Civic Education (Montenegro)

Ivan Vukovic, Member of Parliament of Montenegro; Vice President, Democratic Party of Socialists

Predrag Zenovic, Chief Negotiator for Montenegro's Accession to the EU, Government of Montenegro