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Croatia-Montenegro: Bilateral Conflicts Meet EU Veto Power

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Abstract

Among the candidate countries for accession to the European Union, Montenegro remains the frontrunner in the negotiation process when compared to its Western Balkan neighbours. All chapters of the *acquis communautaire* have already been opened, marking substantial progress in formal alignment with EU standards. Nevertheless, the country's trajectory toward membership reached a standstill in December 2024, when Croatia exercised its veto power on the closure of Chapter 31 "Common Foreign, Security and Defence Policy". This blockage, arising from unresolved bilateral disputes, not only highlights the persistent role of domestic politics in shaping enlargement dynamics but also illustrates a broader structural weakness of the EU accession framework: the capacity of individual member states to halt the process on the basis of national interests, thereby undermining the credibility and consistency of the enlargement policy as a whole.

This paper examines Montenegro's trajectory toward EU integration, the contentious issues with Croatia, and the potential future scenarios, against the backdrop of Podgorica's ambitious objectives: finalizing accession negotiations by 2026 and securing membership in the European Union by 2028. Drawing on the European Commission's 2025 Report, it further situates Montenegro's stalled accession as a critical test of the European Union's enlargement policy, where technical readiness meets political discretion.

Evolution of EU–Montenegro Accession Negotiations

Montenegro's self-determination is recent, as is its application for membership in the European Union, yet the country has made remarkably swift progress in fulfilling the requirements set out by the *acquis* chapters. Independent since 2006, following the dissolution of the State Union with Serbia, Montenegro submitted its application for EU membership in 2008 and was granted official candidate status in December 2010. Since then, the pursuit of European integration has become one of the central pillars of both foreign and domestic policy promoted by Podgorica. In just over a decade, Montenegro has succeeded in opening all negotiating chapters – a result that positions it as the most advanced candidate among the Western Balkan states¹.

The process, however, has not been linear. The acceleration achieved after 2020, with the closure of some chapters, was followed by several years of stagnation. Specifically, difficulties have stemmed from internal reforms related to benchmarks on the rule of law, the judiciary, and the fight against corruption – areas that the EU has placed at the very core of democratization and integration.

A central dimension of the integration process concerns Montenegro's alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). From the early stages of negotiations, Podgorica demonstrated a clear willingness to conform to European positions – a recent example being the adoption of EU declarations and sanctions in response to Russia's war in Ukraine².

Montenegro's membership in NATO represents a further element of international legitimization. Joining the Atlantic Alliance in 2017³ consolidated the country's status as a stable regional actor and strengthened its Euro-Atlantic projection. NATO membership has provided not only greater security, but also political backing that has positively influenced the EU accession process.

This alignment, however, is not without internal tensions. A segment of Montenegrin society remains doubtful toward Euro-Atlantic commitments, often influenced by historical and cultural ties with

¹ European Commission, updated, Montenegro, source: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/montenegro_en.

² Milic, P., 2025, Montenegro Approves Troop Deployment to EU Mission Supporting Ukraine, BIRN, source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/06/12/montenegro-approves-troop-deployment-to-eu-mission-supporting-ukraine/>.

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017, Montenegro joins NATO as 29th Ally, source: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_144647.htm.

Serbia and by the presence of Eurosceptic political forces⁴. Despite such reservations, the country's strategic orientation remains firmly anchored to European and Euro-Atlantic integration, viewed as a guarantee of stability, economic development, and security

Under President Filip Vujanović⁵ (2003–2018) and the DPS-led governments, the country declared independence, launching EU candidacy in 2008. Milo Đukanović (2018-2023), serving also as prime minister during multiple terms, consolidated NATO membership in 2017 and advanced EU accession negotiations while strengthening domestic reforms⁶. However, his long tenure was accompanied by allegations of corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and suppression of dissent, which generated domestic opposition and criticism from international observers. Despite these controversies, and a pro-Serbian coalition chapter⁷, Montenegro's overall trajectory remained pro-European and pro-Atlantic. With the election of Jakov Milatović as president in 2023 and the Europe Now (*Evropa Sad*) movement forming the government, the country continues to prioritize European integration and Euro-Atlantic alignment, emphasizing economic modernization, anti-corruption measures, and the goal of EU membership by 2028⁸. While minority political forces occasionally expressed reservations about NATO and EU alignment, the central trajectory of successive administrations demonstrates a broad political consensus that transcends individual leadership changes.

As highlighted by the European Policy Centre⁹ (2025), Montenegro represents a “*low-risk, high-impact*” accession candidate: its small economic size and advanced alignment make it an ideal test case for the credibility of the EU's enlargement policy. The EPC argues that completing Montenegro's accession would offer a *confidence-building tutorial* for the Union itself, demonstrating that conditionality can still deliver results when matched with political will.

Key Domestic Reforms: Judiciary, Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights

With the opening of accession negotiations, Montenegro was required to undertake a broad set of reforms to demonstrate the credibility of its institutions. The European Commission's 2012 Progress Report highlighted several key areas where the country needed to demonstrate tangible progress to align with EU standards¹⁰. In the field of justice, legislative measures were introduced to ensure greater independence of the judiciary, including new procedures for the appointment of judges and prosecutors. Specialized bodies for combating corruption and organized crime – issues particularly pressing across the Western Balkans – were also established, thereby responding to the strong recommendations of the European Commission. Nonetheless, the reform of the rule of law remains a particularly sensitive area. According to international studies and reports, corruption continues to represent a structural challenge. Beyond legislative processes, the EU has demanded tangible,

⁴ Newsroom, 2025, Montenegro's path to the EU is not all smooth sailing, The New Union Post, source: <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/05/30/montenegro-eu-accession-negotiations/>.

⁵ Al Jazeera, 2003, Montenegro gets new president, source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/5/12/montenegro-get-s-new-president>.

⁶ Milosevic, M., 2013, Montenegro Launches Plan to Depoliticise Judiciary, BIRN, source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/05/15/montenegro-brings-in-plan-for-depoliticizing-judiciary>.

⁷ The Guardian, 2022, Montenegro's conservative pro-Serbian governing coalition collapses source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/montenegros-conservative-pro-serbian-governing-coalition-collapses>.

⁸ BH, 2025, Milatović: EU to begin drafting Montenegro's accession agreement, Vijesti, source: <https://en.vijesti.me/news-b/politika/777208/Milatovic-urges-EU-to-begin-drafting-Montenegro%27s-accession-agreement>.

⁹ Stratulat, C., 2025, Montenegro's EU accession: A confidence-building tutorial for the Union, source: <https://d1xp398qalq39s.cloudfront.net/uploads/ckeditor/2025/10/23/montenegro-eu-enlargement-policy-brief.pdf>.

¹⁰ European Commission, 2012, Key findings of the 2012 Progress Report on Montenegro, source: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_12_769.

measurable progress, with concrete results in judicial proceedings as evidence of actual implementation^{11;12}.

Another key issue concerns the strengthening of fundamental rights. Montenegro has adopted legislation to improve the protection of national minorities, freedom of the press, and transparency in public life. Yet criticisms persist, particularly regarding their effective enforcement: pressure on independent media¹³ and the obstacles faced by civil society in monitoring state institutions remain critical concerns where credible progress is still expected¹⁴.

According to the European Commission's 2025 Enlargement package¹⁵, Montenegro's progress on those chapters remains *moderate to good*, yet implementation continues to lag behind formal legislative alignment. Judicial independence, backlog reduction, and anti-corruption enforcement remain areas of concern, with few final convictions in high-profile cases. The Commission also noted persistent weaknesses in public administration capacity and political interference in judicial appointments, suggesting that reforms have reached a plateau despite renewed commitments by the *Evropa Sad* government.

At the same time, these institutional improvements are underpinned by a remarkable level of popular support for EU accession. Surveys conducted in recent years confirm that Montenegro is the Western Balkan country where public backing for EU membership is the strongest¹⁶. This consistently high level of public support for EU membership strengthens Montenegro's European trajectory, yet it also highlights the urgency of addressing the bilateral disputes with Croatia, which remain an obstacle to advancing the accession process.

Bilateral Issues with Croatia

On 20 December 2024, during the EU–Montenegro Intergovernmental Conference in Brussels—convened to provisionally close negotiating chapters that the European Commission had assessed as technically ready—Croatia blocked the closure of Chapter 31, *Foreign, Security and Defence Policy*,

¹¹ International Commission of Jurists, 2024, *Beyond the Benchmarks: Dilemmas of Effective Judicial Reforms in Montenegro*, Geneva, source: https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Report_Beyond-the-benchmarks-Dilemmas-of-effective-judicial-reforms-in-Montenegro.pdf.

¹² Commission Staff Working Document, 2024, *Montenegro 2024 Report*, Brussels, source: https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Report_Beyond-the-benchmarks-Dilemmas-of-effective-judicial-reforms-in-Montenegro.pdf

¹³ Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2025, *Montenegro*, source: <https://cmpf.eui.eu/country/montenegro/>.

¹⁴ Center for Civil and Political Rights, 2025, *Montenegro's Human Rights Reforms: Genuine Progress or EU Box-Ticking?*, source: <https://ccprcentre.org/ccprpages/montenegros-human-rights-reforms-genuine-progress-or-eu-box-ticking>.

¹⁵ European Commission, 2025, *2025 Enlargement package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners*, source: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2584.

¹⁶ In 2025, 73% of the respondents answered “*Would vote to join the EU*” to the question “*If a referendum were held today on your country joining the European Union, how would you vote?*” (in 2024, the same question resulted in 79% of positive responses); whereas 63% answered “*Yes*” to the question “*Is the European Union serious in its intention to offer membership to Western Balkan countries?*”. International Republican Institute, 2025, *Western Balkans Regional Polls*, source: <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-may-july-2025/>.

Methodological comparison to another survey, led by De Facto agency commissioned by the EU Delegation to Montenegro in 2023: the support of the citizens of Montenegro for the country's membership in the European Union reached a record high level of 79.3%. Press and information team of the Delegation to MONTENEGRO, 2023, *Record high public support for Montenegro's EU membership*, source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/record-high-public-support-montenegros-eu-membership_en?s=225.

thereby effectively exercising its veto power. Croatia justified its veto by referring to unresolved bilateral issues, listed in a *non-paper*¹⁷ circulated a few weeks earlier with ten specific conditions¹⁸.

The December 2024 crisis occurred upon already existing tensions. On one hand, the adoption by the Montenegrin Parliament of a resolution condemning the crimes committed in the Jasenovac, Dachau, and Mauthausen camps was perceived by Zagreb as a hostile political gesture aimed at directly targeting Croatian national memory. On the other hand, long-standing issues — such as the maritime border delimitation at Prevlaka, the division of former Yugoslav assets (notably the training ship *Jadran*), the legacy of the Morinj detention camp, and the protection of the Croatian minority in Montenegro — remained unresolved.¹⁹

Memorial Issues and Reconciliation

The first area of tension, which has prompted Croatia's recent actions, concerns issues tied to the memory of the conflicts of the 1990s.

In June 2024, the Montenegrin Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the crimes committed in the Croatian camp of Jasenovac (along with Dachau, and Mauthausen). The resolution was largely promoted by three pro-Serbian political figures – Andrija Mandić, Speaker of the Parliament; Milan Knežević, Member of the Parliament; and Aleksa Bečić, Deputy Prime Minister – and was a reaction to the international recognition of the Srebrenica genocide (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 78/282²⁰)²¹. While framed within a universal perspective condemning totalitarianism, the explicit reference to Jasenovac was interpreted by Zagreb as a hostile political gesture aimed at directly targeting Croatian national memory.

This controversy in turn, fueled the dispute over the Morinj detention camp in Montenegro, where Croatian civilians and military personnel were held during the Yugoslav wars. While some perpetrators were prosecuted, Croatia has consistently demanded formal recognition of the victims, memorialization of the site, and symbolic gestures of reconciliation. In this context, the Jasenovac resolution was perceived as disregarding Croatia's longstanding calls for acknowledgment of Morinj, exacerbating diplomatic tensions. Compensation efforts began in 2014 with payments to 13 former detainees²², and more recent agreements in 2025 aimed to extend financial recognition to additional victims, with sums reportedly exceeding €17 million²³.

As a reaction, a diplomatic note of protest was issued, and the three Montenegrin politicians who promoted the Resolution were declared *persona non grata*²⁴.

¹⁷ Bu., A., 2024, Hrvatska poslala non-paper Crnoj Gori, blokada pregovora s EU na horizontu, Oslobodjenje.ba, source: <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/region/hrvatska-poslala-non-paper-crnoj-gori-blokada-pregovora-s-eu-na-horizontu-1003437/>.

¹⁸ Center for Western Balkan Studies, 2025, Western Balkans Overview Jun 20, 2025 – CWBS, source: <https://cfwbs.org/western-balkans-overview-jun-20-2025-cwbs/>.

¹⁹ Wankiewicz, P., Kobeszko, Ł. (in cooperation with), 2024, Croatia sets conditions for Montenegro's accession to the EU, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), source: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-12-13/croatia-sets-conditions-montenegros-accession-to-eu>.

²⁰ Source: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/282>.

²¹ Visnjic, B., 2024, Croatia Bans Three Top Montenegrin Officials Over Jasenovac Resolution, Balkan Insight, source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/25/croatia-bans-three-top-montenegrin-officials-over-jasenovac-resolution/>.

²² Tomovic, D., 2014, Montenegro to Compensate Croatian Jail Camp Prisoners, BIRN, source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/03/03/montenegro-detention-camp-victims-got-compensation/>.

²³ CDM, 2025, Croatia seeks at least €17m in compensation over Morinj camp, source: <https://www.cdm.me/english/croatia-seeks-at-least-e17m-in-compensation-over-morinj-camp/>.

²⁴ Republic of Croatia Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, 2024, Press Release, source: <https://mvep.gov.hr/press-release-273727/273727>.

Territorial and Property Disputes: The Case of Prevlaka and the Issue of Former Yugoslav Assets

The most significant territorial dispute in bilateral relations between Croatia and Montenegro concerns the Prevlaka Peninsula: strategically located at Croatia's southernmost tip on the Adriatic coast, it holds control over access to Montenegro's main deep-water port, influences maritime borders and navigation rights, carries significant historical and political symbolism for both countries, and has potential economic value due to reported hydrocarbon deposits in surrounding waters²⁵. Following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in early 1990s, this area became the subject of clashes between Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which included Montenegro. In 1992, rising tensions led to United Nations intervention and the establishment of an observation mission to prevent the risk of armed conflict. Although a provisional arrangement for joint management has been in place since 2002²⁶, and the independence of Montenegro (2006) shifted the direct bilateral negotiations between the two states, the definitive delimitation of the maritime border has yet to be ratified. In 2008, Zagabria and Podgorica agreed to involve the UN International Court of Justice to resolve the issue. However, subsequent efforts have not yielded a permanent solution²⁷.

For Croatia, the resolution of this dispute constitutes a preliminary condition for supporting Montenegro's European path.

Beyond the territorial question, the issue of former Yugoslav property also remains unresolved. Croatia has called for greater clarity on the distribution of military and civilian assets, including properties of historical and symbolic value. Among the most emblematic cases is the training ship *Jadran*: used for decades by the Yugoslav navy, it is currently under Montenegrin control but claimed by Zagreb as part of Croatia's national heritage²⁸. In Croatia, the restitution of the vessel is regarded as an act of historical justice, whereas in Podgorica it is perceived as the relinquishment of a core element of its naval legacy. The dossier thus carries considerable symbolic weight.

The Rights of the Croatian Minority

The presence of the Croatian minority in the Bay of Kotor represents a recurrent point of consideration in bilateral relations. According to the 2023 census results released by the National Statistical Office (MONSTAT)²⁹, there are approximately 5,150 Croats in Montenegro, making up 0.83% of the total population of 623,633; 1,304 of them reside in the Kotor region, representing 5.74% of the local population of 22,746.

Primarily Roman Catholic and often referred to as "*Bokelji*,"³⁰ this community preserves a distinct linguistic, religious, and cultural heritage, speaking Croatian, Montenegrin, or both. Montenegro recognizes Croats as a national minority, guaranteeing official use of the Croatian language and providing institutional representation through the Croatian National Council based in Tivat, which oversees cultural, educational, and language-related initiatives. Politically, the Croatian Civic

²⁵ Kajosevic, S., 2020, Montenegro Pushes for Arbitration Over Prevlaka Dispute With Croatia, BIRN, source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/05/montenegro-pushes-for-arbitration-over-prevlaka-dispute-with-croatia/#:~:text=With%20the%20disintegration%20of%20Yugoslavia,oil%20explorations%20in%20the%20Adriatic.>

²⁶ United Nations, 2002, Press Release SC/7596, source: <https://press.un.org/en/2002/sc7596.doc.htm>.

²⁷ Center for Western Balkans Studies, 2025, Prevlaka. Open question source: <https://cfwbs.org/prevlaka-is-an-open-question/>.

²⁸ Visnjic, B., 2025, BIRN Reality Check: Montenegro and Croatia Still in Dispute Over Yugoslav Ship, BIRN, source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/17/birn-reality-check-montenegro-and-croatia-still-in-dispute-over-yugoslav-ship/>.

²⁹ Central State office for Croats Abroad, updated, Croatian minority in Montenegro, source: <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/croats-abroad/croatian-national-minority-in-12-european-countries-2493/croatian-minority-in-montenegro/2497>.

³⁰ Croats of *Boka Kotorska* (Bay of Kotor).

Initiative (HGI)³¹, founded in 2002, has secured parliamentary representation, highlighting the active engagement of the minority in democratic processes, with Božo Nikolić becoming the first Croatian representative in 2006. Despite these frameworks, practical implementation remains uneven, with insufficient administrative resources and persistent underrepresentation in some local institutions³².

Croatia emphasizes the need to strengthen guarantees regarding language use, education, and political representation, framing the matter as an integral part of protecting its nationals abroad. Podgorica highlights the progress made at the regulatory level, in line with European standards, yet limitations remain in their practical implementation, partly due to insufficient administrative resources. The 2024 European Commission Progress Report underscores the need for continued efforts to protect minority languages and ensure effective participation in public life, education, and media³³. Perceptions remain divergent: for Zagreb, this is a national priority, whereas in Montenegro the issue is sometimes leveraged in domestic political debates. In the absence of a more systematic bilateral dialogue, the matter risks remaining divisive and may continue to affect the country's European path.

Future Scenarios

The Croatian–Montenegrin dispute highlights deeper structural dilemmas surrounding the future of the European Union's enlargement policy. On the one hand, the unanimity rule and the use of national vetoes provide Member States with an instrument to safeguard their vital interests and ensure that accession negotiations take into account bilateral sensitivities. On the other hand, such practices risk transforming the enlargement framework into a platform for the projection of bilateral disputes, thereby undermining the credibility, predictability, and merit-based nature of the accession process. This tension reveals a fundamental weakness of the EU's veto mechanism and accession process, opening the way for 3 different scenarios:

A. Bilateral Compromise and Advancement of Negotiations

The most desirable scenario, both for Montenegro and the European Union, is a bilateral compromise that leads to the unblocking of Chapter 31. In this regard, the European Commission's Montenegro 2025 Report³⁴ notes that: «*Relations with Croatia intensified through the ongoing dialogue to find solutions to outstanding bilateral issues. In addition to dialogue at ministerial level, several high-level visits and meetings also took place, including between the Prime Ministers in the margins of the Bled strategic forum*³⁵» (European Commission, p. 74).

Building on this positive dynamic, Montenegro and Croatia could establish a joint technical commission tasked with finalizing the maritime border and coordinating the monitoring of shipping lanes in the Prevlaka Peninsula area. In the case of former Yugoslav assets, such as the training ship *Jadran*, an independent arbitration mechanism could be instituted to determine ownership or usage arrangements, potentially including temporary joint management or symbolic restitution. To address issues related to historical memory, the two countries could develop a structured bilateral framework

³¹ More information: <https://www.hgi.co.me/>.

³² Centar za monitoring i istraživanje, 2024, Enhancing the Legislative Framework to Ensure Greater Political Participation of Minorities, source: <https://cemi.org.me/en/post/enhancing-the-legislative-framework-to-ensure-greater-political-participation-of-minorities-1164#:~:text=%22There%20is%20no%20justice;%20our,to%20attain%20representation%20in%20Parliament.>

³³ Commission Staff Working Document, 2024, Montenegro 2024 Report, Brussels, source: https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Report_Beyond-the-benchmarks-Dilemmas-of-effective-judicial-reforms-in-Montenegro.pdf

³⁴ European Commission, 2025, Montenegro 2025 Report, source: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2025_en?prefLang=it.

³⁵ The leading international conference in Central and South-Eastern Europe. A project of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia organised jointly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia and the Centre for European Perspective.

encompassing commemorative initiatives, educational programs, and museum projects that recognize the experiences of both Morinj and Jasenovac victims, potentially supported by EU-funded reconciliation initiatives. Finally, to safeguard the rights of the Croatian minority in Montenegro, the government could implement targeted measures to enhance access to Croatian-language education, improve political representation, and ensure equitable participation in local administration. While these steps provide a framework for addressing outstanding issues, their implementation is contingent on political will, domestic consensus, and sustained bilateral cooperation.

B. Prolonged Stalemate and the Risk of Postponement Beyond 2028

If a mutually acceptable solution is not found, the veto on Chapter 31 could evolve into a long-term blockage, similar to previous cases involving other candidate countries in the Balkans (e.g. North Macedonia). If so, the accession process would lose momentum, generating frustration among the Montenegrin public and weakening internal European support³⁶; also, external actors might find opportunities to increase their influence in the region. Russia, for example, could leverage the situation to consolidate influence among pro-Serbian political groups, promote narratives favourable to its geopolitical interests, and attempt to undermine Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Similarly, China could seize the opportunity to expand infrastructure investments, economic partnerships, and diplomatic ties under the Belt and Road Initiative, increasing its leverage over the country. In this sense, a stalled accession process would not only challenge Montenegro's European trajectory but could also have broader implications for regional stability and the strategic balance in the Western Balkans³⁷.

C. Multilateral Intervention

A third scenario envisages a more robust multilateral intervention. The European Union, aware of the risk of paralysis, could act as an institutional reference and mediating force in order to temper the pressure of national vetoes, promoting pragmatic solutions to overcome the deadlock. The EU has previously facilitated the resolution of long-standing bilateral disputes, notably in the case of the North Macedonia–Greece name dispute, which culminated in the Prespa Agreement in 2018³⁸. This example demonstrates that the EU can act as a mediator by combining structured dialogue, technical expertise, and incentive-based leverage linked to accession prospects.

Specifically, EU engagement could be structured through the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement (DG NEAR), which oversees the accession process, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who could facilitate diplomatic dialogue. Best practices for effective mediation include establishing structured negotiation platforms with clear objectives and timelines, engaging technical experts on border demarcation, legal issues, and minority rights, ensuring the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders such as civil society, and providing EU assistance or incentives to encourage compliance.

However, unlike in the North Macedonian case, at present there are no concrete EU initiatives aimed at addressing the Montenegro-Croatia dispute – which remains largely an internal matter between the two countries; yet has external implications for Montenegro's progress in the EU accession process. Nonetheless, the North Macedonian case also highlights important limitations: while the mediated

³⁶ Ristovska, I., 2024, North Macedonia elections: nationalists' comeback season, Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale, source: https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/brief_n._17_north_macedonia_elections_-_ristovska.pdf.

³⁷ e.g.: 1) Lamprecht, P., Ströhm, B.C., 2025, China's Expanding Influence in the Western Balkans: Why Montenegro Matters, European Centre for International Political Economy, source: <https://ecipe.org/blog/china-influence-in-montenegro/>. 2) Dickson, J., Harding, E., 2024, Russia Aims at Montenegro, Center for Strategic & International Studies, source: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-aims-montenegro>.

³⁸ Source: <https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/eidikathemata/agreement.pdf>.

agreement successfully resolved a specific bilateral issue, broader structural reforms and domestic political tensions were not automatically addressed, and compliance relied on voluntary implementation. Similarly, in Montenegro and Croatia, EU facilitation alone would not guarantee long-term resolution unless accompanied by sustained political commitment, oversight, and implementation mechanisms. Therefore, a multilateral approach could help mitigate the pressure of national vetoes and shift the discussion to a multilateral framework, less susceptible to domestic political instrumentalization, but its success would ultimately depend on the willingness of both parties to translate negotiated agreements into concrete actions.

It should be noted that the effectiveness of such an approach would ultimately depend not only on institutional capacity but also on the political will and cohesion of EU member states. Divergent national interests or lack of consensus could limit the EU's ability to enforce or incentivize compliance, highlighting that technical mediation alone may not suffice without sustained political commitment.

Conclusions

Given the perspective of these three scenarios, a set of strategic provisions could help Montenegro and Croatia move beyond the current stalemate in EU accession negotiations.

For Montenegro

Accelerate structural reforms: prioritize the effective implementation of laws in the areas of justice, rule of law, and anti-corruption, demonstrating tangible progress in judicial proceedings and administrative transparency.

- Strengthen negotiating and diplomatic capacity: establish permanent bilateral task forces with Croatia to systematically address the issues of Prevlaka, ex-Yugoslav assets, and the Jadran ship, ensuring continuity regardless of domestic political shifts.
- Memory and reconciliation management: promote joint initiatives with Croatia on memorial issues (Morinj, Jasenovac), framing them within a European perspective of shared truth and post-conflict reconciliation.
- Minority rights protection: enhance guarantees for the Croatian minority, including access to education in the Croatian language, fair political representation, and equitable participation in local administration, ensuring compliance with EU standards by fostering social cohesion.

For the EU and its Member States

- Control the political use of vetoes: develop mandatory preventive mediation mechanisms before a single Member State can formally block the closure of a negotiating chapter, reducing the risk of political instrumentalization. Yet, given the entrenched unanimity rule, such tools can only mitigate rather than eliminate the use of vetoes, making incentives and bilateral compromises equally essential.
- Support Montenegro's institutional capacities: enhance technical and financial assistance for public administration and fund management, ensuring that reforms move from legislation to credible implementation.
- Reinforce the EU's facilitating and leading role: encourage and mediate bilateral solutions, preventing historical disputes from undermining the overall credibility of enlargement, and, where necessary, deploy multilateral arbitration tools. Currently, EU efforts to foster direct dialogue between Montenegro and Croatia remain limited, highlighting the need for more proactive engagement. The EU should assert its influence in the Western Balkans by (i) countering external interference³⁹ and resilience programs against disinformation; (ii) offering

³⁹ Cfr. Note 33.

competitive economic and security support⁴⁰ via funding for infrastructure and energy diversification and joint security initiatives; (iii) promoting integration to protect local communities, considering the engagement of neighbouring countries of influence⁴¹.

An integrated approach – combining diplomatic pressure, concrete incentives, and a framework for multilateral mediation – could transform the current obstacle into an opportunity. The Croatia–Montenegro dispute offers the European Union a chance to demonstrate its capacity to manage tensions constructively between Member States and candidate countries, thereby reinforcing its credibility as a geopolitical actor and consolidating its role in the Western Balkans.

⁴⁰ Morina, E., 2024, America first, Europe next: Trump will change dynamics in Western Balkan security, European Council on Foreign Relations, source: <https://ecfr.eu/article/america-first-europe-next-trump-will-change-dynamics-in-western-balkan-security/>.

⁴¹ De Silva, S., 2022, Turkey's role in the Western Balkans, between cooperation and competition with the European Union, Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale, source: https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/brief_n._5_-_de_silva_eng.pdf.