2022 Commission Report on Montenegro

2022/2202(INI) - 26/09/2023 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Tonino PICULA (S&D, HR) on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro.

Commitment to EU accession

The report commended Montenegro's long-standing commitment to EU integration and reiterated its support for Montenegro in this regard. Members stressed that progress and the overall pace in negotiations depends on meeting interim rule of law benchmarks. Moreover, although all 33 screened chapters have been opened, Members regretted 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.

Members also regretted 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.

Following recent elections in the country, the report stressed that Montenegro needs a stable pro-European government capable and willing to continue on the EU accession path as soon as possible.

Democracy and the rule of law

Members regretted 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. They also regretted the deep polarisation, lack of dialogue, mistrust and political boycotts in the Montenegrin Parliament that have seriously hampered the legislative process. Both the legislative and executive branches are urged to strengthen loyal cooperation, including on the accession process.

The report regretted the lack of progress made on the reform of the electoral, legal and institutional framework.

Montenegro is urged to put in place a credible and effective criminal justice response to corruption. The report welcomed Montenegro's ongoing cooperation with EU agencies such as Europol and Eurojust and noted 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.

Fundamental freedoms and human rights

Montenegro is called on 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. The report expressed 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. Further measures are needed against hate speech, social exclusion and discrimination and to improve vulnerable groups' access to justice, employment, housing and healthcare.

Socio-economic reforms

Members positively noted the reported budget surplus for the first quarter of 2023 and the projected economic growth in 2024. They encouraged Montenegro to adjust its economic growth strategy to boost productivity and human capital. Increased public investment is needed in the education system for sustainable social and economic development. The country is called on 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.

Noting China's increased interest in investing in the Western Balkans and transportation infrastructure projects in Montenegro as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, the report called on the authorities to reduce economic dependence on China.

Montenegro is encouraged 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.