

I welcome Montenegro as the newest EU candidate

2010 will be remembered as a momentous year for EU–Montenegro relations. Yesterday, the Commission adopted its Opinion on Montenegro's application for membership of the European Union. It recommended that Montenegro be granted the status of candidate country. Almost one year after the introduction of visa-free travel for Montenegrin citizens in the Schengen area, the Opinion brings more good news for Montenegro and its progress towards the EU.

Montenegro's commitment to European integration is a strong asset. During the preparation of our assessment, the Montenegrin authorities demonstrated commendable drive. Montenegro's goal of European integration enjoys broad political support, which adds momentum by turning this process into a common endeavour.

Montenegro has made substantial progress towards fulfilling the accession criteria, but more needs to be done to open accession negotiations. Montenegro made progress in the area of rule of law mainly by the adoption of important new legislation and the continued strengthening of its capacities. The country broadly fulfils conditions related to the Stabilisation and Association process, regional cooperation and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The Commission identified key priorities for each area where further progress is needed. These are intended to serve as guidance for Montenegro to continue advancing on its European path.

The rule of law must be strengthened. Corruption and organised crime, which undermine the very fabric of the society and economy of the country, need to be combated effectively; a convincing track record of investigations, prosecutions and convictions in cases at all levels needs to be produced; the independence and the accountability of the judicial system must be reinforced and public administration needs to be both strengthened and depoliticised. Montenegro has substantially improved its legal framework in recent years. Now we need to see that it works in practice.

Media freedom and engagement with civil society are indispensable pillars of a free, democratic society. Respect for human rights needs to be consolidated. Access to legal status as well as to economic and social rights for displaced persons needs to be ensured. The Civil Society should be fully involved in the European integration project, ensuring that interaction between citizens in existing EU member states and Montenegro is a joint investment in Europe's future.

Our proposal that Montenegro would be granted candidate status is recognition of the country's progress and a strong encouragement to continue reforms. **The rules of the game called enlargement are well known.** Each country is judged on its own merits; each country has the ball in its own court. It is now up to Montenegro to show the necessary resolve to produce the results that will move its accession process forward.

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This article is published on the occasion of the publication on 9 November by the European Commission of its 2010 Enlargement Package, including the Opinion on Montenegro.