

## **Keep momentum on reforms**

To those who, like me, are keen interlocutors and visitors of Montenegro, this year's opening of accession negotiations with the EU is no ordinary achievement. It was not just about acknowledging how well the country had done on key reforms. It was also about overcoming prejudices shared by many Europeans on Montenegro's actual commitment to good governance. And about overcoming prejudices in Montenegro about EU conditionality. Reality is obviously not exactly as caricatured in Montenegro's Eurovision song!

The start of negotiations marks a new big chapter in relations between Montenegro and the European Union, which was only possible because of the broad national consensus around this goal and the support for reforms. The new leadership after the coming elections will need to keep this momentum going, and strive towards the goal of membership with equal commitment, leading the country through the transformation process by addressing both its future and its past.

Montenegro has already done a lot. Yet a lot more will need to be done and accession negotiations will not be easy. More concrete results will be needed in the fight against corruption and organised crime. Independence of justice needs to be further strengthened, including through constitutional reform. These are such important issues for both Montenegro and for the EU that they will be at the heart of the negotiation process from the very beginning until the very end, to give time for the impact of the reforms to be clearly seen, and clearly felt.

The European Commission will accompany Montenegro as it travels the road to the EU. What will remain central to everything that lies ahead is Montenegro's national consensus on its EU project. In this, remember that the reforms that we are discussing are much more than something done just to tick boxes for Brussels. They are to improve the day-to-day lives of Montenegrin citizens.

Montenegro's path towards EU membership offers an opportunity to modernise the country. I am confident that Montenegro will make the most of that opportunity.

The path towards the EU is long and challenging, but it is one worth taking. Stay determined. Membership in the EU lies ahead.

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