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MEMBERSHIP IN THE EU - THE IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

By: **Predrag Zenović**, Chief Negotiator of Montenegro with the EU

Without much hesitation, in December 2023, I accepted the invitation extended by Minister Gorčević to put my knowledge about the European integration process to use in the role of a manager of the negotiations with the European Union. I had a clear goal - to accelerate the process for achieving Montenegro's membership. At that time, my decision could have looked as an act of defiance against reality; defiance against the process fatigue, inherited weaknesses of institutions and generally accepted belief that European path was slow and bore no real fruit.

However, this defiance of mine was not an act of denying reality but of challenging it. It was derived from a dream, that, like every sincere dream, simply had to come true. It was derived from the idea whose time had come, as great Victor Hugo used to say. It was a kind of idealism too, the one that does not avoid responsibility but is ready to take it; the idealism that does not ignore constraints but turns them into a starting point for change. In that sense, the belief of the Minister Gorčević that a U-turn is possible in our country's European affairs was not an expression of naive optimism, but an informed political decision to translate an ideal into measurable results with a huge support of our European partners.

As a frontrunner among the candidates, Montenegro, together with Albania, is the only country that opened all negotiation chapters, while it is far ahead of all other countries by the number of closed chapters. Successful technical screenings in other chapters show that the goal of closing them within the planned deadline is realistic, which opens the path for accession by 2028. And that would not be only an administrative success but a proof that, with several years of an intensive reform agenda, clear focus of the society and full commitment of institutions, international credibility can be restored, democratic consolidation accelerated and optimism for the future rebuilt, even in the time of global uncertainties.



Photo: Predrag Zenović, Chief Negotiator

In the spirit of Jean Monnet, European Union is not constructed as a final project, but as a collection of concrete answers to complexities of the modern world. Today's Union is an answer to fragmentation, crises, wars, climate challenges and technological crashes. Montenegro inherently belongs to that answer - not only politically, but from the civilisation point of view. It belongs to the circles that shaped contemporary Europe, but also to its historic



Photo: Intergovernmental Conference, Brussels, 16th December 2025

line where, through various times it built bridges to broader, European framework. That path is at the same time an expression of its political identity and permanent openness to Europe.

Western Balkan remains one of the missing links in the chain of the European idea. Without its full integration, the European project remains unfinished. In that process, Montenegro must be a frontrunner - not because of inertia or geography, but because it deserves to be, because of the values it lives and the ability to change. Power of self-criticism, readiness to transform institutions and consistency in application of the rules are the elements that define contemporary Europe and precisely these elements are present in Montenegro today.

In the end, the path Montenegro has passed so far clearly shows that a lot of strength, patience and discipline has already been invested and that the decision about the outcome is being made now. Every step that will follow will have more weight, because there is no more room for any hesitation or improvisation. In 2026, where our goal is to close all the chapters, it is of key importance to achieve the rhythm, rely on the lessons learnt and show consistency in action. If we persist in that spirit, if Montenegro remains the centre of European optimism in the region, the dream that for years seemed to be out of reach will become a political and social reality.

AMBASSADOR OF CYPRUS, ANDREAS PHOTIOU FOR "EUROKAZ"

MONTENEGRO, AN ENLARGEMENT SUCCESS STORY

By: **Marko Vešović** Radio and Television of Montenegro

Montenegro has the potential of becoming a very positive example of successful enlargement, provided that the reform momentum is maintained and reforms are fully implemented. The EU's expectations are clear: progress must be credible, measurable and irreversible, and firmly anchored in European values, says the Ambassador of Cyprus in Montenegro Andreas Photiou for Eurokaz.

The occasion for this conversation was the forthcoming presidency of Cyprus in the Council of the EU.

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans will certainly be high on the agenda of your country's presidency of the Union. In this context, how do you see Montenegro's position?

EU enlargement will indeed be a key priority of Cyprus' Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and in this context, Montenegro, holds a particularly distinct and prominent position.

Montenegro is widely recognised as one of the frontrunners in the enlargement process. It has opened 33 negotiating chapters and has made further tangible progress with 12 negotiating chapters now provisionally closed. This demonstrates a clear strategic orientation and political commitment to EU membership, which we recognise and value.

At the same time, we believe that the next phase should focus on consolidating reforms, in particular in the rule of law, freedom of expression, media freedom, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and public administration. Montenegro is also expected to further improve its administrative capacity. Sustained reform momentum and concrete, measurable and irreversible results will be essential for further advancing the accession process.

During Cyprus' Presidency, we will work in a fair, credible and merit-based manner to keep enlargement high on the EU agenda, supporting Montenegro and all Western Balkan partners in translating reforms into tangible progress, to the benefit of their citizens and the European Union as a whole.

How do you assess Montenegro's progress on its European path and what should we focus on during the upcoming presidency?

Montenegro has made steady and tangible progress on its European path and is rightly regarded as one of the frontrunners in the EU enlargement process. Having opened all negotiation chapters and achieved a high degree of alignment with the EU acquis, including with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Montenegro has demonstrated a clear strategic commitment to EU membership.

The focus going forward should be on consolidating reforms and delivering concrete results, particularly in the areas of rule of law, judicial independence, the fight against corruption and organised crime, media freedom, and the effective functioning of democratic institutions. These are key elements for further advancement and for building lasting public trust in the accession process.

During Cyprus' Presidency of the Council of the EU, we will work to maintain momentum in the enlargement process in a fair, credible and strictly merit-based manner. Our aim will be to support Montenegro in translating reform efforts into measurable outcomes, while keeping enlargement firmly anchored as a strategic priority for the European Union.

From your perspective, what will be the further European path of the region, especially Montenegro, in light of all the current developments in the EU and the expectations that the EU has from the countries of the region?

EThe European perspective of the Western Balkans is strategically important for the European Union, particularly in the context of today's complex geopolitical environment. Enlargement is increasingly seen not only as a policy choice, but as a geostrategic investment in Europe's stability, security and long-term prosperity.

For Montenegro in particular, the prospects are quite positive. The country has positioned itself as a frontrunner and has demonstrated a clear European orientation, including a high level of alignment with EU policies and



Photo: H E Mr Andreas Photiou, Ambassador of Cyprus

values. Maintaining the reform momentum, especially in the core areas of the rule of law, judicial independence, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the strengthening of democratic institutions are crucial elements for advancing the negotiation process further. Reforms must not only be adopted but effectively implemented and deliver real benefits to citizens.

Montenegro has the potential to become a very positive example of successful enlargement, provided that the reform momentum is maintained and reforms are fully implemented. The EU's expectations are clear: progress must be credible, measurable and irreversible, and firmly anchored in European values.

Cyprus strongly believes that enlargement is a strategic investment in the stability, security and prosperity of Europe, and we will work constructively with all partners to ensure that this process remains both ambitious and rigorous.

Do you believe that the drafting of the Accession Treaty of Montenegro will begin soon?

Montenegro is widely recognised as the most advanced candidate country, having opened all negotiating chapters and provisionally closed 12 of them. In this context, discussions about the possible drafting of the Accession Treaty are a natural reflection of the progress achieved so far.

During Cyprus' Presidency of the Council of the EU, our focus will be on maintaining the momentum of the enlargement process, ensuring that negotiations advance in a credible and predictable manner, and supporting candidate countries to continue to deliver on reforms. That said, and provided that Montenegro continues to demonstrate sustained progress and meets the necessary benchmarks, the Presidency will be ready to move to the next phase, including preparatory work related to the Accession Treaty, at the appropriate time and in line with the Council's position.

What is your assessment of the bilateral relations between Cyprus and Montenegro?

Relations between Cyprus and Montenegro are excellent and characterised by mutual respect, shared European values and a steady strengthening of political dialogue. Since Montenegro's independence, our two countries have built a relationship based on trust, constructive cooperation and a common vision for a stable and prosperous Europe.

Political contacts at bilateral and multilateral level are regular and substantive, while cooperation within international fora is marked by close coordination and mutual support. At the highest level, the President of Montenegro visited Cyprus in June 2024 and the President of Cyprus visited Podgorica in April 2025 also in view of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Cyprus has consistently supported Montenegro's European integration path, recognising its reform efforts and its role as a factor of stability.

At the same time, there is a clear potential to further deepen cooperation in the areas such as tourism, maritime issues, trade and investment, education and cultural exchanges.

Looking ahead, Cyprus' Presidency of the Council of the EU offers an opportunity to further enhance our bilateral engagement and to work closely with Montenegro in advancing its European perspective. We remain committed to strengthening our cooperation, both bilaterally and within the broader European framework, to the benefit of our two countries.

The Council of the European Union (EU) decided to establish an ad hoc work group for drafting the Accession Treaty with Montenegro.

However, the conclusions on enlargement were adopted as conclusions of the Danish Presidency, since the Member States couldn't reach consensus.



Ambassador of the European Union (EU) Johann Sattler, said in an interview to the MINA Agency that the work group would start working in the following six months.



MONTENEGRO CLOSED FIVE NEGOTIATION CHAPTERS IN THE CONFERENCE IN BRUSSELS

A GREAT BREAKTHROUGH, BUT A LOT OF WORK AND MANY OBLIGATIONS ARE STILL THERE FOR MONTENEGRO

By: Milan Žugić, MINA Agency

Closing five negotiation chapters in the negotiations with the European Union, (EU) Montenegro entered a new accession stage. Official Podgorica expects to close the remaining 22 chapters next year, to meet all the obligations and to be ready for EU membership in 2028.

"The Council decided to establish the work group that will work on the accession treaty with Montenegro. So, that is it, it will happen. I expect that, in the next six months, this work group will start working. It is an important task, because all agreements on different chapters must be included in the work of that work group and there is lot to be done."

Asked for how long Montenegro might wait for the treaty to be drafted and ready, Sattler repeated that the drafting process would start in the period to come, adding that they had already had conversations with representatives of Cyprus who would take over the presidency in the Council of the EU.

Asked about the roadmap to membership for Montenegro, rapporteur of the European Parliament for Montenegro, Marjan Šarec, said for Eurokaz that the entire process could be divided in stages.

"We are now approaching the final stage of the negotiations, and the sooner it finishes the better for all of us. When the negotiations finish, we will enter a new stage, and it will contain further challenges. That will be the stage of ratification in Member States, where I expect many holes on the road and many bumps. And also, not much will depend on Montenegro in that stage. It will depend on the opinions in Member States, political developments, elections, etc.... I mean, we will all have to work a lot on that. Of course, there are countries for which you will not even know that they ratified the treaty because they will do it so fast. But there are other countries where not everything will be easy. That is reality and it is not good to try to close our eyes to it and we will not. Because citizens of Montenegro must know that EU is often far from being an ideal creation, but it is still better than everything else," says Šarec.



Marjan Šarec

Asked how difficult it would be for Montenegro to close about 20 chapters next year, Šarec responded that it seemed to be pretty demanding because the deadline was very short.



Predrag Zenović, Chief of Negotiator

"I have had a large number of meetings in Brussels recently with the officials from Montenegro. I had very good meetings with the ministers and with the Prime Minister Milojko Spajić. I must underline that we discussed many issues and difficulties that are on your path. But the impressions that I had got confirmed - there is much willingness and awareness of the situation in Montenegro. Of course, each person can see problems in different ways, but the overall direction is good. As a former Prime Minister and Minister, I have to emphasize that the job they do is not easy. With the capacities that Montenegro has, the achievements made so far can be described as miraculous. Montenegro's administration is small in numbers, but people, like the Chief Negotiator and the others, are strongly motivated. They really work hard and I hope they will continue. I hope you don't mind me joking a bit.... Montenegro is not what it used to be... But daily politics is a different story. Botun and similar things are not beneficial. It is indeed not in the interest of Montenegro's citizens to try getting political points to the detriment of the environment. And there are other cases too. That is why I appeal to all politicians, not to obstruct the European path. The chapter related to the environment is of huge importance", underlined Šarec.

Asked what the Montenegro's roadmap to the expected 2028 membership actually looked like, the Chief Negotiator of Montenegro with the EU, Predrag Zenović, explained that, unofficially, the discussions were opened also about chapter 34. Institutions, because it is the chapter that got both opened and closed in the very end.

"The plan is to close all the chapters by the end of next year. In the meantime the work on the accession treaty should be initiated, and everything necessary to start the final political stage has to be prepared", said Zenović. He said that the enlargement was important for the EU, because it was the fact that for fifteen years the Union had not been enlarged, while the enlargement used to be the strongest foreign policy of the EU, the so called "soft power of the EU". "The enlargement should be perceived as an opportunity, particularly if you have a candidate like Montenegro, that, in terms of budget or fiscal policy, does not make any significant impact on the EU framework, while it is at the same time under the scrutiny when it comes to the rule of law, and is making progress and has 100% aligned foreign policy", said Zenović.

He said that the Accession Treaty would be the point of no return for the entire process and a political signal of the Member States that they were ready for the fact that Montenegro was moving in an accelerated manner, i.e. that it was finishing the negotiation process.



Photo: MINA

Former Minister of European Integration, Gordana Đurović, thinks that Montenegro is on a good path, if the geopolitical and political support that now exists continues, and if Montenegro manages to avoid shooting itself in the foot again as when it failed to elect all judges of the Constitutional Court.

"Montenegro needs to show a bit more of political unity too. The Government and technocratic structures will certainly do their best. Of course, their efforts should be supported by the budget that meets the needs of the closing benchmarks, i.e. the necessary investment", said Đurović.



photo: Government of Montenegro

She also said that it was not the problem to close all negotiation chapters next year or to do it in the first months of 2027. Đurović said that the issues of meeting the political criteria and ensuring political stability were equally important as closing of the negotiation chapters.

"The decision on initiating drafting of the accession treaty would be a great and symbolic sign that we are nearing the end of the negotiations. The decision of the Council recommending EC to start drafting the Accession Treaty would really make the process much more realistic and alert everyone in the country that door is opened for Montenegro", said Đurović.

Foto: MINA



TREATY ON ACCESSION OF MONTENEGRO AS A TEST OF FUTURE EU ENLARGEMENTS

By: Jovana Đurišić

Drafting of the Treaty on Accession of Montenegro to the European Union requires first the establishment of an appropriate work group that will elaborate technical details, while the European Commission is willing to provide support in this process. That is what the EU headquarters in Brussels says for Eurokaz, commenting on the initiative to start drafting the Treaty on Accession of Montenegro to the European Union soon.

Speculations about the beginning of the work on the Treaty on Accession of Montenegro to the European Union started months ago. Although none of the treaty parties is sure at this point what the document will look like, there are already some speculations about what provisions it will contain, what will be different from the latest treaty signed in 2011 and who it will favour more, Brussels or Podgorica.

When it comes to point of drafting the treaty, the public gets the impression that the country is already almost there, reaching the membership in the EU. However, the experience from earlier enlargements and current political circumstances in Brussels show that this is a far more complex process, that will in the case of Montenegro probably open a completely new chapter in the history of EU enlargement.

What is the Accession Treaty?

Accession Treaty is the final, legally binding document that in a formal manner concludes the negotiations between European Union and a candidate country. It defines conditions under which the country becomes a member state, but also all transitional arrangements, exceptions and safeguards that might apply even after the membership in the Union.

In other words, during the negotiations, the discussions are about laws, reforms and chapters, but the Accession Treaty is the moment when all of that is "locked" in one document that then must be ratified by all member states

of the EU, and the country acceding the EU. Therefore, in European circles this Treaty is frequently described as a political-legal bridge between the candidate status and full-fledged membership.

European Commission says that Montenegro has achieved a significant progress towards the accession, closing four negotiation chapters last year.

"Commitment of Montenegro to temporarily close additional chapters by the end of 2025 reflects its commitment to European integration. Keeping stable progress in reforms and continuous seeking of a broad political consensus are of key importance for achieving the country's goal to conclude the accession negotiations by the end of 2026, said Guillaume Mercier, spokesperson of the European Commission.

He says that, if Montenegro keeps the current pace of reforms, it is on the good path to meet this ambitious goal. As for the Accession Treaty, Mercier says that the Commission is ready to provide support in the process.

"Drafting of the Treaty on Accession requires first the establishment of an appropriate work group that will elaborate technical details, while the European Commission is willing to provide support in this process. Establishing the work group will require a decision of the member states. This does not prejudge the outcome of the discussions on temporary closing of the negotiation chapters", says our collocutor.

Neighbour's experience

Experience of Croatia, the latest county to join the EU, has shown that drafting of the treaty does not happen



Ivan Mijanović

in the very finish of the negotiations but earlier than it is commonly thought. Work group of the Council of the EU for drafting the Croatian accession treaty was formed in December 2009, while the treaty was signed two years later, on 9 December 2011.

This means that, already in 2009, the EU considered it to be politically realistic to start the technical and legal work on the document, although the negotiations were formally not finished at that time. It is precisely that time period that serves as an orientation point in the estimates of when the similar process might start for Montenegro.

It has been two decades without any new accession treaty since the Croatian treaty was signed in 2011. If the start of drafting this document for Montenegro is connected with 2026, this will be the first accession treaty after almost 15 years.

In the meantime, in the decade behind, the EU faced multiple crises at home. Financial crisis, Brexit, pandemic, and, in the end, the war in Ukraine, led to the discussion of the EU's own future. Although the document about reforms in the EU and preparations for enlargement are being postponed from one month to another, it is clear that the new generation of accession treaties will have a different response to security, political and institutional challenges.

For now, it is certain that the future treaty will contain strong safeguard mechanisms and transitional periods. This was confirmed recently by the European Commissioner Marta Kos, when she emphasized that the scope of such measures would be the matter of negotiations with the Member States.

"The scope of the so-called safeguard measures or transitional periods will be established in the Accession Treaty. That will be the matter of negotiations between your country and the Member States. On the other side, sometimes the safeguard measures do not protect only the European Union, but your country too. Almost every candidate country asks for transitional periods, which means that the country gets more time or years to handle, do or align some things... So, in this respect, I cannot say what measures and what transitional periods will be there for Montenegro. But what I can say is that we have not yet discussed it. I know there are rumours that the new members, Montenegro being the first of them, will not have the right of veto. This has not been discussed yet. Such a thing would mean that we have two classes of member states of different levels and I do not like that idea. I want



European Commission

Montenegro to sit at the table on an equal footing with all member states, and not in the second-grade part without any right to say anything. But I want to repeat, we are yet to see what will be in the Accession Treaty," said Mrs Kos.

Still, the key question remains – how to fit in the enlargement into the EU that has not yet implemented its own internal reforms. This is precisely where the key uncertainty lies, because the Union expresses political will for enlargement, but at the same time postpones the answer about changes that would make it more functional if it had more members.

And the fact that the process is technically demanding, but also politically sensitive, is underlined also by Ivan Mijanović, the correspondent of the Radio and Television of Montenegro from Brussels. He says that, before drafting of the accession treaty starts, methodology has to be defined and the key principles of the future accession treaties must be clarified.

"Establishment of the ad hoc group can be expected when Montenegro closes more than a half of the negotiation chapters, probably in the first half of the next year. On the technical side, the dynamics of closing of the chapters is mostly respected, but a clearer response of the EU is still awaited for", says Mijanović.

It is certain, says Mijanović, that the country has so far consistently implemented the roadmap for closing the chapters that was defined in mid 2024.

"The beginning of the next year could, namely, bring closing of the chapter 32 (Financial control), since the draft of the joint position for that chapter has already

been submitted to the Work Group for Enlargement in the Council of the EU. In addition to this, Montenegrin administration has recently published that, during the first months of 2026, the chapter 21 (Trans-European networks) could be closed too. It is expected that the first quarter could also bring closing of the chapter 1 (Free movement of goods). So, it can be concluded that, from the technical point of view, the planned dynamic has been kept. However, the response of the EU is still waited for", says Mijanović.

Our collocutor reminds also that the recent Summit of the EU confirmed a "clear and unambiguous support of the EU leaders to the Western Balkans".

"Actually, they sent the message that EU wanted to enlarge but still did not know how. The internal reforms are being postponed from one month to another, while candidate countries anxiously await to see to what extent Brussels will be creative in terms of "transitional periods" and monitoring", Mijanović thinks.

Safeguards as a part of the document

Mijanović thinks that "The new generation of Accession Treaties", as the new treaties for Montenegro and the other candidate countries are called in some of the Member States, will certainly contain strong safeguards that match the challenges that the Union is faced with.

"The safeguards will primarily refer to the field of the rule of law, while the transitional periods could include the areas like free movement of workers and services, as was already the case in the latest enlargement waves (Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia in 2013). There is also the unavoidable topic of limiting the veto right, that is currently not "popular" among the members of the Commission, because it would mean the existence of the Members States of the first and second class," concludes Mijanović.

All of this shows that the Accession Treaty of Montenegro will not only be a technical finalization of the long negotiation process. It might become the first test of the new enlargement philosophy of the EU that guarantees credibility of the Union and equality of the future members at the same time. In the case of Montenegro, the Accession Treaty will not only be a confirmation of membership, but also the answer to the question of what kind of European Union Brussels wants in the years to come.

FROM OBLIGATION TO OPPORTUNITY

AGENCY FOR PAYMENT UNLOCKS MILLIONS OF EUROS OF THE EUROPEAN FUNDS

By: Bojana Milićević, RTCG Journalist

Establishing the Agency for payments in agriculture, rural development and fishery is not only a formal obligation on our path to EU membership, but the key step in the building of reliable institutions that work in the interest of Montenegrin farmers, fishermen and entrepreneurs in food industry, says the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management for Eurokaz. Montenegrin farmers expect the Agency to improve their status, and to provide support and assistance. Experience from the neighbouring Croatia is that the establishment of the Agency for payments brought a number of concrete and measurable benefits.

Decision of the Government of 1st January 2026 provides for establishment of the Agency for payments in agriculture, rural development and fishery in Montenegro. Establishment of this Agency is one of the key obligations of every EU Member State and the key precondition for using the funds from the joint European funds, says the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management. They explain that this institution will be in charge of managing payments from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), as well as from national sources within the state aid measures.

"Agency for Payments is a strategic investment into the institutional capacities of the state and access to millions of euros of European funds that are available for the Member States. Its establishment ensures that Montenegro, from the day of accession to the EU, can independently manage and implement the Common Agricultural Policy measures. According to the assessments from the Implementation Plan, the total investment for establishment of the Agency and the supporting Integrated Administrative and Control system (IACS) amounts to 26 million euros for the period

2025 - 2028, as it is planned that at that time the Agency will be fully accredited", explains the agricultural sector of the Ministry.

Farmer from the Municipality of Zeta, Luka Krstović, thinks that, in addition to the Credit-Guarantee Fund, establishment of the Agency for payments in agriculture, rural development and fishery is the key component for progress of Montenegrin agriculture and for the assistance that farmers need.

"We, as farmers, will be very soon faced with even stronger competition than the one we have today. It seems to me that today we are not competitive when compared with our direct neighbours and let alone with the broader market competition. That is why, in my opinion, for the future of Montenegrin agriculture, it is very important that we have a easier and, of course, legally allowed and regulated, access to funds that will ensure we can finance the production cycle, purchase of machinery and technological development in this field. I think that, therefore, the establishment of this Agency should improve the status of farmers in Montenegro", said Krstović.

Establishing the Agency for Payments in agriculture, rural development and fishery is not only a formal obligation on our path to EU membership, but the key step in the building of reliable institutions that work in the interest of Montenegrin farmers, fishermen and entrepreneurs in food industry, says the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management for Eurokaz.

"And it is not only an administrative alignment either, it is a concrete investment that will ensure Montenegro a direct access to significantly higher amounts from the European funds, several times higher than the amounts available through the current pre-accession programmes like IPARD. Establishing the Agency, Montenegro is creating the preconditions for a sustainable, long-term and financially feasible system of support to its agriculture and rural areas", claims the Ministry.

On the path of building institutions and meeting European obligations, Montenegro has the assistance and support of the neighbouring Croatia. The Croatian Agency for Payments in Agriculture, Fishery and Rural Development says for Eurokaz that, since 2011, they have been continuously cooperating with the colleagues from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management in Podgorica.

"A number of bilateral and study visits have been organized. They focused on the implementation of the IPARD programme and establishing of the ARKOD/LPIS system.



This exchange of experience proved to be exceptionally useful in the acceleration of the process of alignment with European standards", says the Croatian Agency for Payments in Agriculture, Fishery and Rural Development.

They say that the Croatian experience clearly shows that the establishment of the Agency for Payments brought a number of concrete and measurable benefits.

"First of all, an effective and secure absorption of the EU funds for agriculture, rural development and fishery has been ensured, with significantly higher level of transparency and control of public funds. Farmers and fishermen got clearer, more predictable and administratively better regulated procedures for exercising their rights to support", says this institution.

Montenegrin farmers hope for similar results. Luka Krstović expects that establishment of the Agency for payments will ensure that the understands, supports and assists farmers in a better way.

"Without adequate assistance of the system, we will not be able to use the capacities of our agriculture. It would be good that in the period to come we make better results as partners and through better understanding of the entire process", said Krstović.

Asked what the budget and organizational implications of the establishment of the Agency would be, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management responded that the money would be secured from donors' funds, World Bank loans and partly from national funds that would be planned in the budgets for 2026, 2027 and 2028. Relevant analyses and documents show that the Agency for Payments, to be fully operational and functional, should employ 264 people by 2028, out of which 48 in 2026, 40 in 2027 and 26 in 2028. As the Ministry explains, the relevant Directorate that has been transformed into the Agency for Payments in Agriculture, Rural Development and Fishery already has 94 employees. The number of employees will increase after the required legal amendments are adopted. They concluded that the required labour undoubtedly existed in the national market.

NIKŠIĆ - EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE FOR 2030

By: Mato Uljarević



After a two-year long process of preparing the application, in October this year, the Municipality of Nikšić won the title of European Capital of Culture for 2030 - the most important European title in the field of culture that the European Commission has been awarding for 40 years.

Providing statement of reasons for their decision, in the European House, the jury underlined that it was one of the most difficult decisions ever. It is understandable, since the counter-candidate was the Ukrainian city of Lviv. With the population above 750.000 people, Lviv is considered a cultural capital of Ukraine, and it has been in the focus particularly in the last couple of years. Thus, in 2025 it had the title of the European Capital of Youth - a significantly smaller project, but the one that is often considered a preparation for the title of European Capital of Culture.

As a team, regardless of the strong competition, we were determined to do our best. We put efforts into ensuring that, regardless of the final result, our work contributed to the long-term development of the culture in Nikšić and to positioning of Nikšić in the European cultural map. I think that this attitude was decisive for our victory, because it pushed us to think about every detail and not to let anything

to chance. It was not only the attitude of the team that prepared the application, but of the entire Municipality of Nikšić that mobilized all its resources and capacities to work on this application in the best possible way. This was reflected in the continuous support and direct involvement of the President of the Municipality Marko Kovačević, but also in the support of all the councillors of the Municipal Assembly of Nikšić who in September jointly supported this idea and adopted a unanimous decision in the Assembly supporting the project in the final stage of application.

The Minister of Culture and the Media, Tamara Vujović, has been strongly supporting the initiative since the beginning. Together with us, she participated in the presentation and defence of the application in Brussels, additionally confirming the willingness of the Government to support the project. Just before the formal submission of the application, the Government voted for a formal information about the support and financing of the project of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC).

Thanks to the decisions of the Government of Montenegro and the Municipal Assembly of Nikšić, the organization implementing the ECoC project can start working already in early 2026. Our plan is not to waste any of the precious time waiting for 2030, and already now, through a number of smaller programmes and activities, to start working on developing the audience, positioning Nikšić as a cultural centre and enhancing the capacities of the sector of culture in general - from institutions and NGO sector to individuals who work or want to work as professionals in culture - as managers, producers, event organizers, international promoters, etc.



The idea is to extend the team for implementation of the project, in the years to come; to include young and enthusiastic people, but also to develop human resources in partner organizations that will be in charge of implementation of concrete projects in 2030. One of the key segments of inclusion of citizens will be a platform for volunteers that will be open for people of different age, skills and motivations - those who can help in technical implementation, correspondents, influencers in social networks or informal promoters of the project in every-day life.

ECoC project has the power to transform the city and help it find a new identity. This is an opportunity to transform Nikšić from a heavy industry centre into a centre of creative industries based on the principles of innovation, digitalization and sustainability. The city will get a new face in terms of cultural infrastructure. The areas that have constituted symbols of stagnation of Nikšić for a long time will be transformed into modern cultural spaces. The best example is the House of Revolution (Dom revolucije), a brutalist building, whose construction started in 1978 based on the design of the architect Marko Mušić. The construction stopped after a decade, leaving an unfinished building in the centre of the city to the mercy of time for more than 40 years.

Already in the candidacy stage, Nikšić showed that it was serious in the intention to finally revitalize this space. Thus, two big projects have already been completed within this complex - new building of the Radio and Television Nikšić, and the House of Digital Revolution that serves as an additional space for the work of IPC Tehnopolis.

The works of the construction of the key space for implementation of cultural events in 2030 - Multifunctional Hall - are currently in progress. It will have the capacity to host a significant number of people for various types of events - concerts, performances, workshops, etc. The crown of the work on revitalization of the House of Revolution will be the construction of the Centre of Digital Culture and Gallery of Modern Art in the dome of the building. In addition to this, the key areas in the city will be revitalized too, like the citadel Bedem, cultural-historical areas around the Castle of the King Nikola and cultural infrastructure in rural and industrial areas intended for decentralization of cultural contents, while Radio and Television Nikšić plans to build a state-of-art film studio.



The team that worked on developing the application includes Nemanja Popović, Lucija Strunjaš, Aljoša Matović, Darko Aleksić and me, and the continuous expert support of Vuk Radulović and Sara Vuletić who transferred the experience of Novi Sad. In addition to this, we have cooperated with the key international experts for ECoC projects like Beatriz Garcia and Chris Baldwin and the networks of friends and colleagues from other European Capitals of Culture and creative cities that are members of the Culture Next network together with us. In the presentation of the application in Brussels, in addition to the support of the Minister Tamara Vujović and the mayor Marko Kovačević, we had a huge support of the people who cooperated with the team from the very beginning and gave a significant contribution in preparing the application - adviser for culture, tourism and religious issue, Miljan Mijušković, Nataša Krivokapić (University of Montenegro), Andjela Nikčević (IPC Tehnopolis) and artist Nina Rakojević.

Getting the ECoC title provoked a genuine euphoria in the city and great media visibility on the national level. Therefore, another indeed important title remained in the shadow - the Title of the UNESCO City of Music that Nikšić got only a couple of days later, becoming thus a part of the network of 408 creative UNESCO cities worldwide. The application for the UNESCO City of Music was also implemented by the Office Nikšić 2030, and these two titles will be complementary, positioning Nikšić in the years to come strongly on the cultural map of Europe, and the entire world.

CHAPTER 27 - KEY TO SUSTAINABLE INTEGRATION OF MONTENEGRO IN THE EU

EU STANDARDS IN THE FIELD OF ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION START AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

By: Miodrag Karadžić, NGO Society of Young Environmentalists Nikšić

For more than three decades, the Society of Young Environmentalists Nikšić (SYEN) has constituted one of the most consistent voices in the fight to preserve nature. In 32 years of their continuous operation, the focus of the work of this organization has been equally on improving policies and programmes in the field of ecology and environment protection and on the improvements of general situation in the field.

In the last couple of years, the SYEN has been carefully following the course of negotiations within the chapter 27, contributing actively to the public dialogue and European integration process. It is a part of the Coalition 27, the open platform of non-governmental organizations that jointly follow the negotiation process, advocate transparency and quality of public debate, and prepare the annual "Shadow Report for Chapter 27", as an affirmative document aimed at accelerating EU integration in the chapter 27.

The Society of Young Environmentalists Nikšić thinks that chapter 27 - Environment and climate change - is one of the most difficult, broadest in scope and financially the



most demanding chapters in the process of Montenegro's accession to the EU. Although formally opened in 2018, its implementation still constitutes a huge challenge for Montenegrin institutions.

Effective implementation of European standards requires strong institutions, political will, significant financial investment, long-term strategic planning, but also active participation of citizens and civil society.

In the years behind, Montenegro has undertaken numerous steps to align its legislation with the EU acquis, improving the legal framework, adopting strategic documents and implementation plans. However, implementation of the planned obligations is not going at the desired pace, particularly in the fields of waste management, air quality, nature protection and response to climate change.

The key thing is to establish a sustainable financing system and strengthen institutional and administrative capacities to meet the obligations from Chapter 27 within the envisaged deadlines.

The exceptional importance of providing the public with an insight into the real significance of Chapter 27 and progress in Montenegro's EU integration led to development of the project "Chapter 27 - Key to Sustainable Integration of Montenegro on the Path to the EU". Its basic aim is to explain the process of accession to the EU to local institutions and nongovernmental organizations through the impact chapter 27 on the local level. This project is being implemented in five municipalities in Montenegro (Nikšić, Plužine, Šavnik, Žabljak and Pljevlja).

Through educational workshops, information leaflet, media and digital campaign, public events and lectures for high-school students, the project will provide citizens with explanations of what the Chapter 27 actually means for local communities - from the air and water quality, through waste management to new development and financial opportunities. A particular focus is put on the strengthening of cooperation between local administrations, civil sector and citizens, so that the process of European integration can be more transparent, more understandable and more inclusive.

SHARING BORDERS, GROWING CLOSER

One of the first activities of the project was to celebrate the Day of European Cooperation through a campaign with the citizens in the city square in Nikšić. During a direct communication, citizens were conveyed messages about



the importance of the EU territorial cooperation and joint initiatives in culture, economy and environment.

In that context, the participants talked with citizens about chapter 27 and importance of environment protection as a fundamental element of sustainable development, but also as an every-day value that has a direct impact on the quality of their lives.

The campaign was supported by local nongovernmental organizations and the participants in the campaign were distributed textile tote bags with the messages promoting European cooperation and responsible attitude to the environment, as a symbol of sustainable habits and reducing use of plastic.

The role of municipalities in the process of European integration through implementation of standards from chapter 27. This is the title of an information leaflet printed within the project. In a user-friendly and practical manner, the leaflet deals with Chapter 27, focusing in particular on the local level.

It provides an overview of the key sub-areas, clearly indicating to the role and responsibilities of the local self-government units in their implementation. Through explanation of European regulations and standards, it shows that every municipality becomes a holder of sustainable development, and that European policies are implemented in the most concrete and the most visible manner precisely where the citizens live and work.

A separate part of the leaflet is dedicated to the benefits that implementation of the chapter 27 may bring to local communities through: opportunity to enhance the quality of public services through European standards, opportunity to access funds and partnerships of the EU, responsibility

to secure cleaner, healthier and more resilient environment to their citizens.

HOW DOES THE PROCESS OF ACCESSION TO THE EU BRING BENEFITS TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES?

Although European integration constitutes a strategic goal of the state, its implementation largely takes place on the local level - through the work of municipalities, public companies non-governmental sector and engagement of citizens - it pervades all aspects of life, from security and protection of human rights to quality of life and economic and environmental standards.

On 11 December 2025, in Nikšić, the project brought together civil sector and local government representatives from Nikšić, Plužine, Šavnik, Žabljak and Pljevlja, within the workshop "How does the process of accession to the EU bring benefits to the local communities?"

The workshop presented current environmental challenges and Action plan for meeting the closing benchmarks in the chapter 27. Participants were informed about the essence of chapter 27, EU methodology, role of local governments in the methodology, stages in the negotiation process, details of the Action plan for meeting the closing benchmarks in the chapter 27, etc. The importance of the eight closing benchmarks in Chapter 27 was particularly underlined.

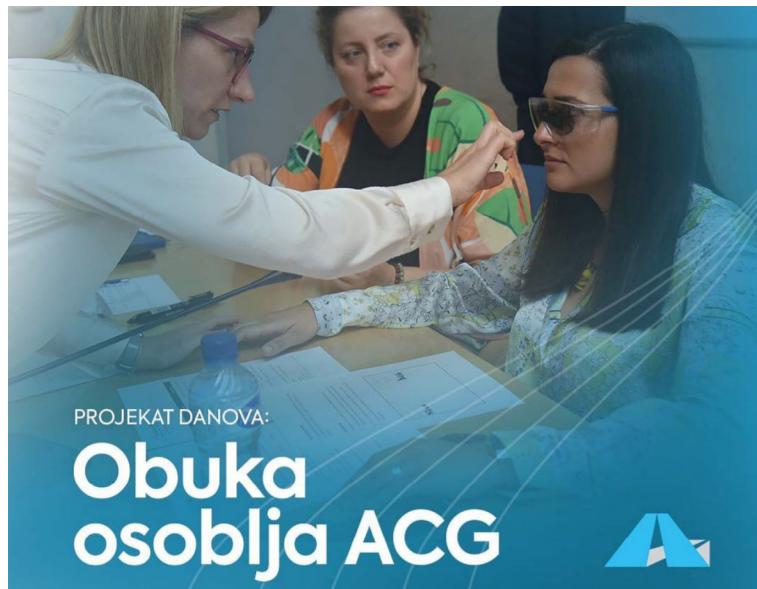
It was emphasized that the content of the Chapter 27 was based on the European Union acquis in the field of environment protection, which is today regulated in more than 200 legal documents - directives, regulations and decisions of the Council and European Parliament.

It was emphasized that the goal of chapter 27 is to align national legislation and practice with these documents, but also to develop administrative and institutional independent and Safe Travel for all: Airports of Montenegro and Port of Kotor in Transnational Projects of the Danube Region Programme future and what the role of younger generations in the EU integration is.

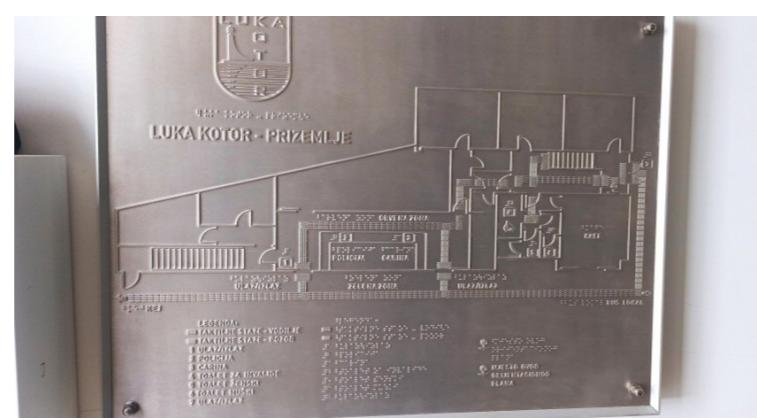


INDEPENDENT AND SAFE TRAVEL FOR ALL: AIRPORTS OF MONTENEGRO AND PORT OF KOTOR IN TRANSNATIONAL PROJECTS OF THE DANUBE REGION PROGRAMME

By: Bojana Popadić, Ministry of European Affairs



Airports of Montenegro AD Podgorica and Port of Kotor AD for years have been actively participating in international initiatives that promote accessibility and inclusiveness in the transport sector. Their participation in the projects "DANOVA" and "DANOVA NEXT" is a significant contribution to modernization of transport infrastructure in Montenegro and alignment with European standards in the field of travelling for persons of impaired hearing or sight, and reduced mobility. Both projects are implemented within the Danube Region Programme that encourages transnational cooperation and sustainable development of the Danube region.



Project "DANOVA" - Innovative transport services for persons with partly or fully impaired sight in the Danube region" was implemented within the financial perspective 2014-2020 in the period 1 July 2020 - 31 December 2022. The total budget of the project amounted to 2,192,546.66 euro, out of which Montenegrin partners got more than 200,000.00 euros. The aim of the project was to improve accessibility of airports and other transport nodes for persons with full or partial sight impairment. The project achieved significant and concrete results in improving physical and digital accessibility. The included providers of transport services acquired new knowledge, competences and tools.

Within the DANOVA project, "Port of Kotor" AD Kotor successfully implemented several infrastructural interventions: 450m of tactile guidance paths in the contact zone from the border zone of the port of Kotor to the bus station across the Kotor open market; internal tactile-contrast lanes have been installed in the passenger terminal of the port of Kotor; 2 orientation plans for persons with sight impairment have been developed; signs in Braille alphabet have been installed within the passenger terminal of the port of Kotor. Key partner in the training of staff was the NGO Association of the Blind of Montenegro that implemented trainings for proper communication and assistance.

Airports Podgorica and Tivat have also successfully implemented a number of measures for accessibility: more than 200 m of tactile paths and tactile walking surface indicators, 77 local microphones (30 in Podgorica, 47 in Tivat), contrast lanes in accessible toilets, video wall in the central hall of the terminal, orientation plan and 58 stickers in Braille alphabet. Accessibility of the official web site for persons with partial sight impairment has also been enhanced.

Coordinator of the Project in the Airports of Montenegro, Nina Leković, particularly emphasizes the following: "We used to have almost no accessibility elements and today we can proudly speak about the environment that ensures free and independent movement, allowing passengers with sight impairment to use airport services in equal conditions like all other passengers. The users responded positively to the results of the project, because the solutions were developed based on their real experience and situations that they face when using the airport services. A particular value that this project has brought is the strengthening of cooperation with the organizations that advocate the rights of persons with full or partial sight impairment. Through direct consultations, we got precious feedback that shaped the solutions implemented in the airports."

The achieved results and successful cooperation led to continuation of the project in the new financial perspective 2021-2027. The Project "DANOVA NEXT" - Smart transport network for accessibility for passengers with disability and reduced mobility in the Danube region through innovative services" extended the field of activities to the persons with hearing impairment and persons with reduced mobility. This project started on 1 January 2024 and will end on 30 June 2026. The total budget amounts to 2,622,400.00 euros, out of which the amount of 325,000.00 euros is available to Montenegrin partners.

The project DANOVA NEXT connects air, maritime and urban transport, demanding a more integrated approach and cooperation between different sectors of transport, local self-governments and civil society.

The Airports of Montenegro plan to use project funds for: instalment of an induction loop at the info desk which is at the same time a meeting point and assistance point for persons with disabilities and reduced mobility; purchase of two electric vehicles for transport of passengers with disability and reduced mobility on the path between aircrafts and passenger terminal; purchase of non-metal wheelchairs for easier transport through the border zone; development of application for assisting persons with disabilities in the port. According to the coordinator Maja Danilović, "In addition to working on the goals of the

According to the project coordinator from the Airports of Montenegro, Jelena Krklić: "Although the project is



Projekat je doprinio povećanju nivoa svijesti o osobama sa oštećenim vidom, o tome da međugradanima i među klijentima i putnicima koji koriste Luku Kotor se nalaze i osobe sa oštećenim vidom, kojim treba otkloniti prepreke i barijere kako bi imali jednake i revnopravne uslove za korišćenje infrastrukture Luke Kotor.

still in progress, the user and target groups feedback that we have received so far is very good and confirms that the approach based on real experience of persons with disabilities produces the most precise and the most useful results. When I say that the user and target groups feedback is positive, I do not think that we get only praises. The quality of feedback is measured by response, openness and willingness of the users to provide concrete advice, criticism and proposals. It is precisely that type of communication that contributes the most to development of practical and feasible solutions. Every time when we get a constructive comment, we take it as a sign that users believe in the process and that they want us to improve accessibility together."

Within the DANOVA NEXT project, the Port of Kotor introduced additional accessible solutions: the induction loop for customs and police points in the passenger terminal of the Port of Kotor; two electric vehicles for assisting persons with reduced mobility; three non-metal wheelchairs for easier transport through the border zone; development of application for assisting persons with disabilities in the port. According to the coordinator Maja Danilović, "In addition to working on the goals of the



Smatram da su projekti kao što je DANOVA znacajan napredak svih koji se bave uslužnim djelatnostima i odgovornost koju moramo konkretno unapređivati i prilagodavati kako bi se poslovni uspjeh nadogradio odgovornim društvenim ponašanjem.

project that were focused on installing the equipment for adjustment to persons with disabilities, our company had the experience of cooperating with the focus group which is exceptionally valuable and irreplaceable. With the support of the Association of the Blind of Montenegro and NGO Imi Boke, we learned how to adjust our approach and treatment of persons with disabilities and how to make their experience in the Port of Kotor more pleasant."

Diversity of the project consortiums in both of these projects ensured that, together, they can develop the solutions that go beyond the borders of one state or one category of users. The project partners include: Airport of Dubrovnik (Croatia) as the leading partner in the project, Airport Budapest (Hungary), International Airport of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), International Airport Chișinău (Moldova), Port Administration Pula (Croatia), and other partners from public transport, local self-governments, academic community and non-governmental sector from various countries of the Danube region which includes Slovenia, Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria.

Joint strategic partner in the project is the Ministry of Transport of Montenegro (previously Ministry of Capital Investment). The Ministry supported projects through participation in workshops, expert suggestions, and dissemination of information to relevant institutions, which increased visibility of the project and facilitated cooperation with users organizations.

According to the opinions of the project partners, the most important value of the DANOVA projects is the fact that cooperation results in solutions that influence passenger experience on a daily basis. As the representatives of the partner organizations say: "DANOVA and DANOVA NEXT have shown that the European calls and the Danube programme do not only constitute a framework for financing, but also the space where real and vivid cooperation takes place. Through this programme, we have had the opportunity to learn about the approaches, solutions and practices that we could otherwise not get, and to compare them with our own experience and daily work. It is also important that the exchange of experience has never been a mere formality. It is actually one of the most beautiful parts of the process. Through the project, we learned about solutions and approaches we did not have an insight into earlier, but at the same time we got

the opportunity to share our own experience. In that way, cooperation developed between partner organizations has become much more than an obligation within the project. It built trust and professional links that last, and that encourage us to support each other in future initiatives too."

TWO COASTS, ONE STORY: NEW DIMENSION OF COOPERATION BETWEEN PLUŽINE AND FOČA

By: *Direction for Bilateral Cross-Border Programmes and Antena, Nikšić*

In the border between Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the municipalities of Plužine and Foča are developing a new dimension of cooperation with a view to creating a joint tourism offer based on natural beauties and cultural heritage of the region. This joint approach increases visibility of the destination, attracts a larger number of visitors and builds stronger foundations for sustainable tourism.

Piva Lake, Drina River and magnificent mountain landscapes become the centres of new contents, including the adventure park, developed gazebos and enhanced tourism signalization that facilitates movement of visitors and reveals less known localities. Digital tools contribute to



modern presentation of the destination, which makes the region closer to the needs of modern tourists.

Project manager of the Municipality of Plužine, Božidar Knežević, underlines that the important steps have already been implemented: the electric bicycles have been purchased for development of MTB tourism in both municipalities, the equipment for rescue on water has been secured and joint field exercise for local search and rescue services implemented. In the period ahead, a promotional tour is planned for tour operators, media and influencers, as well as a joint participation in the Tourism Fair in Belgrade 2026. A special focus is put on the strengthening of capacities of search and rescue services, which brings more security to the visitors and contributes to preservation of natural heritage, the key resource for both municipalities.

Director of the Tourism Organization of Foča, Spomenka Popadić, underlines that the project has already brought visible changes to the city. Lighting bridges and Clock Tower emphasized the historical heritage, while electric bicycles, that are already in use, promote sustainable and active tourism. As a person living in Foča, I observe how the project is changing the everyday atmosphere in the city and bringing it closer to the modern tourism trends.

Developing new and upgrading the existing amenities, the project will enrich tourism offer in the cross-border area



and contribute to increasing the number of tourists and visitors, as well as to increasing the revenues of the local and national economy.

Investments like installation of the adventure park in Plužine, LED lighting of the key tourism attractions in Foča and purchase of e-bicycles in both municipalities, make a constituent part of the activities that will be aligned with the integral tourism development strategy for Plužine and Foča that the project will work on. Installation of signalization boards and platforms for sight-seeing in the key tourism locations in both municipalities, together with the solar benches for charging mobile devices, will make the stay



of tourists and visitors more pleasant and more interesting. In addition to the activities that contribute to a new and more pleasant experience, the project took into account the security of visitors that it enhances by purchasing equipment for rescue on the Piva Lake and Drina River, as well as by organization of exercises and better coordination.

The project is financed by the European Union within the IPA III Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Bosnia and Herzegovina - Montenegro 2021 - 2027, while the period of implementation is from 1 December 2024 to 30 November 2026. It is implemented by the Municipality of Plužine, in cooperation with the Municipality of Foča, Tourism Organization of the Municipality of Foča and Nature Park Piva. The total value of the project is a bit smaller than 530,000.00 euros. The value of the EU support to the project is over 447,000.00 euros, while the budget for Montenegrin partners is a bit more than 268,000.00 euros.

POLICY LEARNING PLATFORM - SPACE FOR EXCHANGING KNOWLEDGE AND STRENGTHENING PUBLIC POLICIES WITHIN INTERREG EUROPE

By: *Danijela Andić, national contact person for the Interreg Europe Cooperation Programme, Ministry of European Affairs*

In early December 2025, a capacity building workshop took place in Podgorica under the title „Designing digital interoperability roadmaps in Montenegro“. It brought together decision makers and practitioners in the field of digitalization from various state administration bodies and private sector. Great interest of the participants confirmed that digitalization exceeded the frameworks of individual institutions and that it was a joint challenge, the solution of which requires cooperation of all relevant stakeholders.

In the one-day workshop, participants had the opportunity to learn about the best European practices in the field of interoperability presented by experts from Belgium, France and Ukraine. After practical work and exchange of experience, the workshop was concluded by a clear message that digital transformation must remain focused on human being and long-term sustainability, so that the efficient, connected, inclusive systems could be developed, ready for the future needs of the society.

The workshop was organized within the Policy Learning Platform, as a special form of support that the Cooperation programme Interreg Europe offers to beneficiaries from countries candidates for membership

in the European Union. Similar activities were earlier implemented also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and North Macedonia. However, the workshops are not the only form of support that the Platform provides.

What is the Policy Learning Platform?

Along with projects, the Policy Learning Platform is one of the two key pillars of the Cooperation programme Interreg Europe. Its role is to help decision makers and practitioners in Europe to find solutions for challenges they face on the local and regional level, through exchange of experience, good practices and networking.

For ten years already, the Platform has been ensuring access to knowledge, expertise and networks that have been developed through Interreg Europe projects and beyond. It constitutes the space where European community of decision makers and practitioners can use the experience of their colleagues and thematic experts through publications, live and online events, and through direct communication with expert teams. All Platform services are available free of charge.



What are the advantages for the community members?

Platform users can connect with colleagues facing similar challenges, learn from their experience and get concrete advice for improving public policies and strengthening professional capacities.

The Platform offers access to knowledge through a base with more than one thousand good practices rated by experts, shorter analyses focused on specific policy challenges, as well as numerous thematic texts and collections of relevant sources. Approach to people is exercised through workshops and webinars that ensure learning, exchange of knowledge and networking with experts and practitioners who work in the field of regional development policies.

A special segment is the Expert support, available through the policy helpdesk and matchmaking services. One of the most demanded forms of support is peer review that includes the arrival of thematic experts and colleague practitioners to the spot, with a view to developing concrete recommendations and road maps for solving identified policy challenges.

In addition to using the available services, members of the Interreg Europe community have an opportunity to make an active contribution to the work of the Platform, by sharing their own experience or by proposing topics for future publications and events.

More information about the Policy Learning Platform is available in the official website of the Interreg Europe Programme and through the national contact person in Montenegro.

CONTINUITY, PERSISTENCE, RESULTS - THAT IS THE INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION ASSISTANCE - IPA

By: *Ana Janković, Ministry of European Affairs*

There is a continuity of one great idea, idea about eternal peace, that Emanuel Kant formulated in Europe. And there is a problem to make this great idea come true. There are many reasonable people in Europe, but there was very little reason in the last two centuries. Between the great idea and its implementation there is a gap, and it is the task of every generation to bridge that gap in a reasonable manner. (Đindić,¹⁷²)¹

In the complex process of Montenegro's integration into Europe, it is useful to remind ourselves of the core of the European idea and ask ourselves one more time why the institutions, civil sector, and interested individuals invest efforts so that we can become members of the European Union. In the long-term and exhausting process of negotiations between Montenegro and Europe, that



¹ Iz knjige „Evropa s dušom“, KAS Evropa, 2009.

is being developed at different pace, again the old good question re-emerges: why we are where we are. Montenegro is actually conducting two parallel negotiation processes. On one side, the negotiations within, where, torn by its own contradictoriness, weaknesses and powers, it tries to overcome the challenges and show its potential, doing it with more or less success. And on the other side, negotiations with the European Union, where it is trying to implement the reforms in an accelerated manner. The essence of everything is the fact that citizens believe in the European idea and that it seems to them that being a part of Europe makes sense. It is not only a matter of improving the material standard, but, to a large extent, a matter of adopting the new idea of European identity, wish to progress, hope for a better future - in a nutshell, positive emotion to European concept and values.

Good and progressive, sometimes strict, teacher on Montenegro's European integration path is the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance - IPA. Divided into three perspectives (IPA I, II and III) it has shown continuity, it taught us procedures, planning, monitoring and evaluation. It showed us how to come from an idea to implementation. One of the IPA success stories is the project of construction of two significant health facilities: clinic for infectious diseases and clinic for dermatology and venerology that were finalized through the IPA programme 2018 within the IPA II perspective.

The project of construction of these two clinics started on 4th January 2023 with the envisaged duration of 24 months, i.e. by 4th January 2025. Value of this project was 8.5 million euros, and the goal of the project was to improve the health care system in Montenegro to ensure the best possible care for citizens, with improved infrastructural and technical capacities and experience of the institution and staff. Clinics were opened on 19th December 2024 and for almost a year they have been confirming their contribution to the improved health care of citizens.

Since this is a large, significant and successful infrastructural project, it has yet again shown that European idea has positive implications for daily lives of citizens and, in this case, for one of the most important segments - health care. It is important to emphasize that Montenegro is going through long and complex challenges when it comes to sustainability of the health system. Many reforms remain to be implemented, our pace has to be faster, but with persistent European investment in Montenegro, through IPA mechanism that is both complex and creative, the true benefits for citizens have been confirmed. IPA is much



more than money: it promotes discipline, predictability, stability of the system, and financial responsibility. Its long-term presence in Montenegro shows that European values are being lived here. It seems that IPA is the best to prepare us for membership and that the people who work in this structure are aware of all the benefits and challenges. The beauty and significance of being a part of Europe is confirmed in the best possible way when a project is implemented where Montenegro is outdoing itself all over again and proving that reforms are painful in the beginning but healthy in the long run.

WITH EU PROJECTS TO IMPROVEMENT OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

By: Miloš Damjanović, Ministry of European Affairs

Through improvements of the approach and quality of reproductive health services, preventive health care plays an important role in preservation of public health.

Importance of prevention has been recognized by institutions and organizations from Montenegro that, with the support of EU funds, implemented the project CARES and CARES 2 (Cross-border action in the Reproductive Health Sector) with a view to improving the quality of preventive care in the reproductive health care sector. The projects in the value of 646,217,94 euros have been implemented within the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Montenegro - Kosovo.

In Montenegro, these projects were implemented by the nongovernmental organization Foundation for Development of the North of Montenegro (FORS Montenegro), with the view to contributing to raising awareness and improving approach and quality of reproductive health services in the programme areas, particularly among the socially vulnerable groups, while the partner from the Kosovo side was ECMI Kosovo - European Centre for Minority Rights.



In the period 2019 - 2023, through both projects, trainings were organized for medical staff, as well as purchase of valuable equipment for health centres in the municipalities of Andrijevica, Bar, Berane, Bijelo Polje, Gusinje, Petnjica, Plav, Kolašin, Mojkovac, Rožaje, Podgorica and Ulcinj. Colposcopes, ultra-sound devices, autoclaves, and cardiotocography were procured to be used in detecting and diagnosing cervical and breast cancer. In addition to this, a campaign of organized preventive screenings was organized within the project, and research was done about the level of information, knowledge and habits related to reproductive health among women in the target region.

500 preventive screenings free of charge were organized and conducted, as well as a cross-border conference about improvements of reproductive health care. Lectures dealing with this topic were organized in local communities and high-schools.

During the project implementation, the NGO FORS Montenegro emphasized the importance of education of citizens about how important it was to do regular preventive screenings with a view to prevent and fight breast and cervical cancer.

They emphasized that the preventive screenings ensure that some health conditions can be detected in time, which improves the course of treatment, and sometimes even saves human lives, while modern equipment facilitates the work of the medical staff and contributes to the improvements in diagnostic and treatment.

The fact is that, in the region, we are all faced with the same or similar challenges, not only in the field of health care



but beyond. It is precisely the cross-border cooperation projects that ensure that we can overcome the problems by joining forces and by exchanging experience, knowledge and resources. They ensure that we can come up with the best solutions to the benefit of citizens.

Although the projects were finished at the end of 2023, the purchased equipment is still used, and the results of the projects are still visible. Through project implementation, the capacities of health centres have been improved, as well as the quality of services in the reproductive health sector in 12 Montenegrin municipalities. There is a visible improvement of approach and quality of reproductive health services for socially vulnerable groups, while the awareness about protection of reproductive health has been significantly raised, particularly among socially vulnerable groups.



PHOTO GALLERY





Day at PG Market



EU Pub Quiz in Podgorica



European-Day-of-Languages





Workshop Small school of fishing and healthy seafood - get to know the sea and the EU



Conversations with young people - European perspective and challenges of EU membership



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Working breakfast with journalists on the EC Report



Workshop for high school students - Europe without borders in payments_ Discover the advantages of the SEPA system

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