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Montenegro and Croatia: New and old problems and their European dimension

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1. From grenades, looting, and persecution to the act of apology

After 27 years of living together within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and 46 years within Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, relations between Montenegro and Croatia changed dramatically at the end of 1991, following seven decades of cooperation, mutual assistance and joint development.

The so-called “Anti-bureaucratic Revolution” of 1988 and 1989 – or, more precisely, the political coup orchestrated by the then President of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic – aligned Montenegro with the dominant nationalist political option in the former SFRY. The implementation of Milosevic’s policy in Montenegro was conducted under the slogan “the fight to preserve Yugoslavia,” but in reality it represented an attempt to establish Serbian dominance over those republics that envisioned life within Yugoslavia in a fundamentally different way.

Milosevic announced the possibility of war at a mass rally in Gazimestan in 1989, and only two years later this announcement became reality. Under this influence, from 1991 until the break with Greater-Serbia politics in 1997, Montenegro actively participated in the wars fought in the region, including the aggression against Croatia, through its role in decision-making within federal state bodies, as well as through political and logistical support. In addition, a significant number of Montenegrin citizens took part in these wars as members of the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), particularly during the attack on the Dubrovnik area.

This military campaign was accompanied by intensive propaganda and a specific political rhetoric, encapsulated in the phrase “War for Peace.” This narrative sought to portray military aggression as preventive, legitimate, and defensive in nature.

The Parliament of Montenegro also contributed politically to the creation of such an atmosphere. On several occasions, with the votes of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and the opposition People’s Party (NS), it adopted conclusions that granted political legitimacy to the attack on Dubrovnik and the wider Herzegovina region, promoting the thesis that Montenegro was not defending itself at its borders, but rather that “the borders are where our soldiers are.”¹

The Montenegrin leadership, including then President Momir Bulatovic and Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, actively constructed a perception of an imminent threat coming from Croatia. The government-controlled media of the time – Radio-Television of Montenegro, Pobjeda, and Niksicke novine – aggressively disseminated claims about the concentration of “30,000 fully armed Ustashes” and “7,000 terrorists preparing to attack Montenegro,” despite the complete absence of any evidence to support such assertions.

Today, nearly 35 years later, it is known that the ratio of manpower was at least 7:1 in favour of the attacking forces, namely the JNA. The superiority in artillery, naval forces, aircraft, as well as material and technical resources, was overwhelming.

¹ Session of the Parliament of Montenegro of 4 October 1991.

The attack on Dubrovnik began on 1 October 1991 and lasted until the spring of the following year. During this period, 116 civilians were killed, along with 194 Croatian soldiers and 165 members of the JNA from Montenegro. A total of 443 people from the Dubrovnik area were detained in the Morinj and Bileca camps under inhumane conditions. Approximately 33,000 people were displaced, 2,071 residential buildings were destroyed, private and public property in the occupied area was systematically looted, and Dubrovnik was left without electricity and water for 138 days, under a complete blockade.²

In 1997, the Montenegrin government opposed the previously undisputed political authority in Serbia and Montenegro, Slobodan Milosevic, who also bore significant responsibility for the events in Croatia. Following a split within the ruling DPS, the faction led by Milo Djukanovic prevailed, while Momir Bulatovic went on to form a new political party. In June 2000, Djukanovic, in his capacity as President of Montenegro, issued an official apology to Croatia – an important diplomatic and political gesture that marked the beginning of a phase of normalisation of relations.

"I would like to take this opportunity, on my own behalf and on behalf of the citizens of Montenegro – particularly those citizens who share my moral and broader political convictions – to express my sincere regret to all citizens of the Republic of Croatia, especially the citizens of Konavle, the citizens of Dubrovnik, and the citizens of Neretva County, for all the pain, all the suffering, and all the material damage inflicted upon them by any representative of Montenegro within the JNA during those tragic events."³

However, in Montenegro there has never been a systematic societal or institutional confrontation with the moral and political responsibility for the attack on Dubrovnik. The act of apology was not accompanied by broader processes that would have embedded a stable and responsible social attitude toward this segment of the past. The approach of the Montenegrin authorities at the time was characterized by an effort not to condemn the causes of the war or the act of aggression itself, but rather to continuously downplay Djukanovic's responsibility and shift blame onto other actors. As a result, the war and the dishonourable legacy of that period once again became a source of political manipulation and historical revisionism, a dynamic that continues to significantly shape contemporary relations between Montenegro and Croatia.

² Akcija za ljudska prava, Centar za gradjansko obrazovanje i Documenta – Centar za suocavanje s proslocu, „Kad je Dubrovnik gorio“ (*When Dubrovnik Was Burning*), 6 December 2025. Available at: <https://documenta.hr/novosti/34-godine-od-kada-je-jugoslavenska-narodna-armija-izvrsila-najteze-granatiranje-dubrovnika/>. Accessed on: 19 January 2026. "Đukanović se izvinio

³ Djukanovic se izvinio Hrvatima za Dubrovnik" (*Djukanovic Apologised to Croats for Dubrovnik*), B92, 24 June 2000. Available at: https://www.b92.net/o/info/vesti/index?nav_id=8216. Accessed on: 12 January 2026.

2. Recognition of an independent Montenegro and cooperation under the burden of the past

After the end of military operations, negotiations ensued, culminating in the signing of the Cavtat Agreement in October 1992, which provided for the establishment of a demilitarized zone in the area of Cavtat and Herceg Novi.⁴

This area was fully demilitarized under the supervision of the United Nations Mission in Montenegro (UNMOP) from 1996 to 2002⁵. Following the conclusion of the mission, the existing situation was formalized in December 2002 through the signing of the Protocol on the Interim Regime along the Southern Border between Croatia and the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (whose legal successor is Montenegro).⁶ This protocol established an interim regime under which the mainland portion of the Prevlaka Peninsula, together with a narrow maritime strip around Cape Ostro, was placed under Croatian control, while a section of the maritime area along the Montenegrin coast remained under an interim regime without the exercise of sovereignty by either party. This arrangement remains in force today, pending final demarcation, and without prejudice to the permanent delimitation between the two states.

Just days after the referendum decision, on 12 June 2006, the Croatian government officially recognized Montenegro as a sovereign state and proposed the establishment of diplomatic relations between Zagreb and Podgorica. At that time, Croatia expressed its intention to develop good-neighbourly relations, while also emphasizing that “the historical circumstances, causes, and the role of Montenegro during the war against Croatia in the recent past must be established,” alongside addressing the unresolved issue of missing persons and the protection of the rights of the Croatian minority in Montenegro.⁷

Cooperation then intensified, leading to a measurable improvement in bilateral relations. These positive developments were not confined to declarative political statements but were translated into concrete actions in the areas of security, the economy, and minority rights protection.

An undeniably significant milestone in deepening the partnership was Montenegro’s accession to NATO in 2017. Joint membership transformed the relationship between the two countries from one based on neighbourhood to one grounded in alliance.

Furthermore, following Croatia’s accession to the European Union in 2013, it provided support and assistance to Montenegro in the European integration process and has since assumed the role of a kind of “mentor” in this context.

⁴ Resolution 779 (1992) / adopted by the Security Council at its 3118th meeting, on 6 October 1992. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/151309?ln=en&v=pdf#files> Accessed on: 24 January 2026.

⁵ United Nations Peacekeeping, UN Mission of Observers in Prevlaka (UNMOP) – Background Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unmop/background.html> Accessed on: 19 January 2026.

⁶ United Nations Security Council, Letter dated 10 December 2002 from the representatives of Croatia and Yugoslavia to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2002/1348) Available at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/493008/files/S_2002_1348-EN.pdf Accessed on: 19 January 2026.

⁷ Vlada RH priznala Republiku Crnu Goru (*Government of the Republic of Croatia Recognises the Republic of Montenegro*), 12 June 2006. Available at: <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/vlada-rh-priznala-republiku-crnu-goru/5825> Accessed on: 13 January 2026.

Parallel to these processes, the prosecution of those responsible for crimes committed during the siege of Dubrovnik was conducted at both the international and national levels. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague focused primarily on the highest-ranking JNA officers who bore command responsibility.

The most significant cases before the ICTY were those of Pavle Strugar and Miodrag Jokic.

As commander of the JNA's Second Operational Group, General Pavle Strugar exercised effective control over the units that carried out the attack. He was convicted on the basis of command responsibility for attacks on civilians and the destruction of protected cultural and historical monuments during the shelling of 6 December 1991. His final sentence was seven years and six months of imprisonment. The judgment established that he had failed to take the necessary measures to prevent the crimes committed by his subordinates or to punish those responsible.⁸

Vice Admiral Miodrag Jokic, commander of the 9th Naval Sector, was found guilty on six counts, including murder, cruel treatment, and the destruction of cultural heritage. His guilty plea and public expression of remorse were taken into account as mitigating circumstances, and he was sentenced to seven years in prison.⁹

In parallel with these international proceedings, a trial was conducted in Montenegro concerning the Morin camp. This collection centre, established by the JNA on Montenegrin territory in the Bay of Kotor, represents the most direct evidence of institutional involvement in war crimes. At least 160 Croatian civilians and prisoners of war were detained and tortured in the camp.¹⁰ The verdict of the Higher Court in Podgorica stated that "an atmosphere of terror and fear for one's life prevailed in the Morin Collection Center."¹¹

This trial remains an example of limited and selective justice. Human rights organizations strongly criticized both the investigation and the verdicts for their focus on low-ranking perpetrators, the imposition of overly lenient sentences, inadequate judicial reasoning, and the failure to investigate command responsibility.¹² In early 2025, the Montenegrin prosecutor's office reopened cases related to war crimes committed in Morin.¹³

At the same time, within the most recent phase of deteriorating political relations between the authorities of Croatia and Montenegro, the issue of war crimes committed at the Lora camp has resurfaced. This is of particular significance with regard to the fate of the so-called "Niksic Group." Namely, since 2007, the County State Attorney's Office in Split has been investigating the circumstances surrounding the deaths of 14 members of the JNA from Montenegro who were captured on the Herzegovina battlefield in 1992 and subsequently transferred to this camp (the so-called Lora 3 case), 12 of whom were later found dead at various locations. Civil society

⁸ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Case Information Sheet: „Dubrovnik“ (IT-01-42), Pavle Strugar. Available at: https://www.icty.org/x/cases/strugar/cis/en/cis_strugar_en.pdf. Accessed on: 12 October 2025.

⁹ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Case Information Sheet: „Dubrovnik“ (IT-01-42/1), Miodrag Jokic. Available at: https://www.icty.org/en/case/miodrag_jokic. Accessed on: 12 October 2025.

¹⁰ Olivera Nikolic, „Slučaj Morinj: Bivši pripadnici JNA osudjeni na 12 godina zatvora“ (*Morinj Case: Former JNA Members Sentenced to 12 Years of Imprisonment*), Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/slucaj-morinj-bivsi-pripadnici-jna-osudjeni-na-12-godina-zatvora/25062264.html>. Accessed on: 10 January 2026.

¹¹ Bogdan Ivanisevic, Tea Gorjanc Prelevic, *Sudjenja za ratne zlocine u Crnoj Gori (2009–2015) (War Crimes Trials in Montenegro (2009–2015))*, Akcija za ljudska prava, Podgorica, 2016. Available at: <http://www.hrraction.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Sudjenja-za-ratne-zlocine-u-Crnoj-Gori-2009-2015.pdf>. Accessed on: 13 January 2026.

¹² Human Rights Action, „Human Rights Action's Statement on the Final Judgement for War Crimes in Morinj, 18 May 2014. Available at: <https://www.hrraction.org/wp-content/uploads/Press-release-Morinj-18.5.2014.pdf> Accessed on: 15 January 2026.

¹³ Jovo Martinovic, „SDT OTVARA STARE SLUCAJEVE RATNIH ZLOCINA: Dolaze li na red nedodirljivi“ (*Special State Prosecutor Reopens Old War Crimes Cases: Are the Untouchables Next*), Monitor, 14 February 2025. Available at: <https://www.monitor.co.me/sdt-otvara-stare-slucajeve-ratnih-zlocina-dolaze-li-na-red-nedodirljivi/>. Accessed on: 14 January 2026.

organizations have repeatedly appealed to Croatian state authorities to ensure greater transparency in the proceedings, so that both the general public and the families of the victims are adequately informed about the progress of the case.¹⁴

In addition to the final verdicts in the Lora 1 and Lora 2 trials – which constitute the official position of the Croatian state with regard to these events – the Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gordan Grlic Radman, has persistently asserted that there was no camp at Lora and that references to it represent a narrative aimed at “equating aggressors and victims.”¹⁵

3. Borders, heritage, and symbolic issues

The most significant dispute between Montenegro and Croatia concerns the delimitation of the territorial sea in the immediate vicinity of the Prevlaka Peninsula, as well as the continental shelf in the southern Adriatic. Croatia argues that the maritime boundary should be drawn in accordance with the equidistance principle, on the assumption that Prevlaka, as Croatian territory, generates Croatian territorial waters. Montenegro, by contrast, maintains that such a solution would be disadvantageous due to the configuration of its coastline and the enclosed nature of the Bay of Kotor, and therefore insists on the application of the principle of equity, taking into account proportionality and relevant geographical circumstances.¹⁶

The issue is further complicated by questions related to the exploitation of natural resources, which add an additional layer of sensitivity to the dispute – particularly after Croatia announced tenders for oil and gas exploration in 2015 in an area that Montenegro considers undemarcated, while at the same time Zagreb objected to Montenegrin exploration plans in blocks that Croatia regards as falling within its own jurisdiction.¹⁷

Both sides have thus far respected the 2002 Protocol and have repeatedly reaffirmed their willingness, should a bilateral solution prove unattainable, to submit the dispute to the International Court of Justice or to an ad hoc international arbitration body with a mutually agreed mandate. However, despite the formal existence of the Mixed Demarcation Commission, it has not convened for several years (the last meeting having taken place in 2015)¹⁸ and no tangible progress has been made toward a permanent settlement.

¹⁴ Documenta & Akcija za ljudska prava, „Drzavno odvjetnistvo Republike Hrvatske treba obavijestiti javnost o rezultatima istrage u predmetu 'Lora 3'“ (*The State Attorney's Office of the Republic of Croatia Should Inform the Public About the Results of the 'Lora 3' Investigation*), 20 November 2023. Available at: <https://documenta.hr/novosti/drzavno-odvjetnistvo-republike-hrvatske-treba-obavijestiti-javnost-o-rezultatima-istrage-u-predmetu-lora-3/>. Accessed on: 13 January 2026.

¹⁵ Pobjeda Editorial Board, „Slobodna Dalmacija: Lora ispunjava kriterijume za koncentracione logore“ (*Slobodna Dalmacija: Lora Meets the Criteria for Concentration Camps*), Pobjeda, 2 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/slobodna-dalmacija-lora-ispunjava-kriterijume-za-koncentracione-logore>. Accessed on: 15 January 2026.

¹⁶ Mirza Imamovic, *The Maritime Border Disputes of Croatia*, Gothenburg School of Business, Economics and Law, 2020.

¹⁷ Vlada CG: Hrvatska je prekrasila protokol o Prevlaci“ (*Government of Montenegro: Croatia Violated the Protocol on Prevlaka*), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 27 April 2015. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/26980571.html>. Accessed on: 10 January 2026.

¹⁸ Paulina Wankiewicz-Kloczko, „Croatia sets conditions for Montenegro's accession to the EU“ OSW – Centre for Eastern Studies, 13 December 2024.

The issue of the Prevlaka demarcation has once again gained prominence in the context of European integration, given the European Union's insistence that candidate countries resolve all outstanding bilateral disputes prior to accession. As early as 2015, the European Parliament called on Montenegro to resolve the border dispute with Croatia amicably or – if that proved impossible – to submit the matter to the International Court of Justice in The Hague.¹⁹ This position was further reinforced by the 2018 Enlargement Strategy, which introduced a more stringent requirement that candidate countries must reach “final and binding solutions” to all bilateral disputes before becoming members. Such an approach has effectively opened space for EU member states to instrumentalise bilateral issues within the accession process.

The most prominent example of this type of instrumentalisation was the dispute between Slovenia and Croatia over the Bay of Piran. In 2008–2009, Slovenia used its status as an EU member state to block Croatia's accession negotiations, keeping several negotiating chapters closed until the dispute was addressed. The European Union was ultimately required to mediate and facilitate the conclusion of the Arbitration Agreement in 2009, which unblocked Croatia's accession path, but also established an important precedent – namely, that an EU member state can use its veto power as leverage in order to resolve a bilateral dispute.

The case of Bulgaria's blockade of North Macedonia has demonstrated how far such practices can extend. Rather than bringing the two countries closer together, the dispute over the Macedonian language and identity has deepened mutual mistrust and fuelled nationalist narratives on both sides. Analysts have warned that this development has opened a “Pandora's box” – a dangerous precedent that other EU member states could potentially follow.

In relations between Montenegro and Croatia, identity-related issues were not at the forefront for many years. However, the position of the Croatian minority in Boka Kotorska²⁰ became a bilaterally sensitive issue following the deterioration of relations in 2024. In October 2025, Croatia sent a diplomatic note to Montenegro highlighting long-standing unresolved cases concerning the restitution of property belonging to members of the Croatian community, whose real estate was nationalized, expropriated, or transferred to third parties after the Second World War, and again during the 1990s, despite decades of legal proceedings initiated by the owners.

The ownership of the training ship *Jadran*, which sailed from Split to Tivat for repairs prior to the outbreak of the war and subsequently remained in Montenegro, is also a subject of dispute. Croatia claims that the ship was unlawfully retained and that it constitutes part of its military heritage, while Montenegro maintains that, since the vessel was located on its territory at the time of independence, it rightfully belongs to its armed forces.

Croatia has also requested a change to the name of the swimming pool in Kotor, which bears the name of Zoran Gopcevic, a former water polo player and one of the guards at the Morinj camp, arguing that such a designation represents an insult to the victims.

¹⁹ European Parliament, Resolution on the 2014 Progress Report on Montenegro, P8_TA(2015)0063, 11 March 2015.

²⁰ „Verbalna nota Hrvatske Crnoj Gori: Vratiti imovinu hrvatskoj manjini“ (Croatia's Verbal Note to Montenegro: Return Property to the Croatian Minority), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 10 October 2025. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/verbalna-nota-hrvatska-crna-gora-imovina/33555384.html>. Accessed on: 15 January 2026.

4. The genesis of the political dispute, the dynamics of deteriorating relations, and their implications

Already after 2020, following the change of government in which Milo Djukanovic continued to play a dominant political role, it became possible to discern the emergence of a potential political problem between the governments of Croatia and Montenegro – or, more precisely, between the political actors that constituted them.

The situation reached its peak when, as a result of political pressure exerted by the Democratic Front (DF), a political grouping close to Aleksandar Vucic, the Parliament of Montenegro adopted a resolution on Jasenovac on 28 June 2024. The very title of the resolution, to which the camps of Dachau and Mauthausen were subsequently added, made it clear that its political target was Croatia.²¹

The Resolution on Jasenovac was adopted by a very narrow majority – 41 out of a total of 81 Members of Parliament.²² A significant portion of the parliamentary majority voted in favour of its adoption. Ilir Capuni, a deputy from the ruling Albanian Alliance, voted against it, while Miodrag Lakovic and Tonci Janovic, deputies from the Europe Now Movement led by Prime Minister Spajic, as well as Artan Cobi and Nikola Camaj, representatives of the Albanian Forum, abstained from voting. During the vote, deputies from the opposition DPS, Social Democrats, Croatian Civic Initiative, Bosniak Party, and Civic Movement URA were not present in the Parliament.²³

This vote continued a broader policy of undermining relations with neighbouring countries that the Montenegrin coalition government was pursuing under political pressure from the DF,²⁴ through a series of concrete actions undertaken during that period. It remains unclear why such a resolution was adopted, particularly given that no statements had been recorded in the Montenegrin public sphere denying the genocide committed against Serbs, Jews, Roma, and disloyal Croats in the Independent State of Croatia between 1941 and 1945.

The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, also participated directly in the campaign that preceded the adoption of the resolution. As early as May 2024, he stated that Montenegro would never adopt a resolution on Jasenovac “because it must not.”²⁵ It is noteworthy that a similar resolution

²¹ Parliament of Montenegro, Ninth Sitting of the First Regular (Spring) Session in 2024. Available at: <https://zakoni.skupstina.me/zakoni/web/dokumenta/zakoni-i-drugi-akti/241/3401-19596-.pdf>. Accessed on: 16 January 2026.

²² Skupstina Crne Gore usvojila rezoluciju o Jasenovcu, opozicija napustila glasanje” (*Parliament of Montenegro Adopted the Jasenovac Resolution, Opposition Left the Vote*), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 28 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/skup%C5%Altina-crne-gore-jasenovac/33013320.html>. Accessed on: 16 January 2026.

²³ Vijesti team, „Nastavak politickog bagatelisanja istorije – usvojena Rezolucija o genocidu u Jasenovcu i logorima Dahau i Mauthausen” (*Continuation of the Political Trivialisation of History – Resolution on the Genocide in Jasenovac and the Dachau and Mauthausen Camps Adopted*), Vijesti online, 29 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/713638/nastavak-politickog-bagatelisanja-istorije-usvojena-rezolucija-o-genocidu-u-jasenovcu-i-logorima-dahau-i-mauthausen>. Accessed on: 16 January 2026.

²⁴ Darvin Muric, Dragan Koprivica, Milena Gvodenovic, Milica Kovacevic, *Prva godina Vlade Crne Gore pod lupom: Od reformskog zamaha do politickog skretanja?* (*The first year of the Government of Montenegro under scrutiny: From a reform momentum to a political detour?*), Center for Democratic Transition, Podgorica, 2024. Available at: <https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CDT-Prva-godina-Vlade-Crne-Gore-pod-lupom.pdf>. Accessed on: 20 January 2026.

²⁵ S.S., „Vucic: Ponašanje Crne Gore najodvratnije, neće donijeti rezoluciju o Jasenovcu, jer ne smiju” (*Vucic: Montenegro’s Behaviour Is the Most Disgusting, They Will Not Adopt the Jasenovac Resolution Because They Dare Not*), Vijesti online, 25 May 2024. Available at: <https://www.vijesti.me/svijet/balkan/708572/vucic-ponasanje-crne-gore-najodvratnije-neece-donijeti-rezoluciju-o-jasenovcu-je-ne-smiju>. Accessed on: 12 January 2026.

did not pass in the Serbian parliament at the end of November 2025 – that is, that Vucic halted its adoption in Serbia²⁶ – despite having strongly supported its adoption in Montenegro.

The adoption of the resolution provoked an immediate and sharp reaction from Croatia. On the same day, the Croatian government responded by characterizing the resolution as “the instrumentalisation of the memory of the victims of Jasenovac for short-term political purposes.”²⁷

Shortly thereafter, concrete measures were taken not only by Croatia but also by the European Union. The leaders of the DF – Andrija Mandić, President of the Parliament of Montenegro, and Milan Knežević, President of the Democratic People’s Party – as well as Aleksa Bčić, President of Democratic Montenegro and Deputy Prime Minister, were declared *persona non grata*. The vote on the resolution also led to the cancellation of a planned visit by Charles Michel, President of the European Council.²⁸

Although Croatia has repeatedly stated that it “will not raise bilateral issues as a condition for Montenegro’s European path,”²⁹ it nevertheless, in response to the adoption of the resolution, blocked the planned closure of Chapter 31 – relating to foreign, security, and defence policy – in December 2024.³⁰

This step marked the first concrete manifestation of the dispute within the European integration framework and subsequently triggered an intensification of bilateral talks throughout 2025. These discussions have been conducted behind closed doors, based on a non-paper that Croatia handed over to Filip Ivanović – then Minister of Foreign Affairs and now Deputy Prime Minister – during a meeting in Zagreb in December 2023.³¹ As confirmed to us by the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, the non-paper was delivered “for the purpose of clearer further communication,” yet no response was received from the Montenegrin side until December 2024, when Croatia once again requested a formal reply.

According to media reports, Croatia set out ten conditions for Montenegro, the most significant of which include fair compensation for prisoners of war, the protection of the rights of the Croatian minority, the status of the Jadran training ship, maritime border delimitation, the prosecution of war crimes, the installation of a memorial plaque at the Morinj camp, and the renaming of the swimming pool in Kotor.³²

²⁶ „Skupština Srbije neće raspravljati o Rezoluciji o genocidu u NDH“ (*Parliament of Serbia Will Not Debate the Resolution on Genocide in the NDH*), Dan portal, 27 November 2025. Available at: <https://www.dan.co.me/srbija/skupstina-srbije-neece-raspravljati-o-rezoluciji-o-genocidu-u-ndh-5326241>. Accessed on: 21 December 2025.

²⁷ Beta, „Hrvatska kritikovala Crnu Goru zbog usvajanja rezolucije o Jasenovcu“ (*Croatia Criticises Montenegro for Adopting the Jasenovac Resolution*), Danas, 28 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/hrvatska-kritikovala-crnu-goru-zbog-usvajanje-rezolucije-o-jasenovcu/>. Accessed on: 25 December 2025.

²⁸ Srdjan Janković, „Briselska opomena Crnoj Gori pred susret Milatovića i Misela“ (*Brussels Warning to Montenegro Ahead of the Milatović-Michel Meeting*), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 1 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-posjeta-eu-misel-rezolucija-jasenovac/33017416.html>. Accessed on: 14 January 2026.

²⁹ „Hrvatska negira da blokira Crnu Goru u pristupnom procesu“ (*Croatia Denies Blocking Montenegro in the Accession Process*), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 16 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/hrvatska-crna-gora-eu/33242013.html>. Accessed on: 12 October 2025.

³⁰ „Crna Gora zatvara tri poglavlja u pregovorima s EU, Hrvatska blokirala zatvaranje jednog“ (*Montenegro Closes Three Chapters in EU Negotiations, Croatia Blocked One*), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 13 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-najverovatnije-zatvara-tri-poglavlja-u-pregovorima-sa-eu-ka%C5%BEu-u-briselu/33238994.html>. Accessed on: 5 December 2025.

³¹ Rješavanje otvorenih pitanja u duhu dobrosusjedskih odnosa i međusobnog uvažavanja (*Resolving Open Issues in the Spirit of Good-Neighbourly Relations and Mutual Respect*). Available at: <https://mvep.gov.hr/rjesavanje-otvorenih-pitanja-u-duhu-dobrosusjedskih-odnosa-i-medjusobnog-uvazavanja/271161> Accessed on: 24 January 2026.

³² Zeljko Trkanjec, „Deset hrvatskih uslova Crnoj Gori za ulazak u Evropsku uniju“ (*Ten Croatian Conditions for Montenegro’s Accession to the European Union*), Vijesti online, 7 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/735789/deset-hrvatskih-uslova-crnoj-gori-za-ulazak-u-evropsku-uniju> Accessed on: 14 January 2026.

Croatia also established a Commission for the Return of the Training Ship Jadran at the end of 2025, through which the issue of the vessel is to be addressed through direct bilateral talks.³³ The very name of this body unequivocally indicates the position it is likely to take in the negotiations, while the key question remains whether the outcome of this process will ultimately determine Montenegro's European future. The Commission is chaired by the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Gordan Grlic Radman. On the Montenegrin side, the process is coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,³⁴ while negotiations on the Jadran itself are led by the Minister of Defence, Dragan Krapovic, a senior official of Aleksa Becic's party, whom Croatia has declared persona non grata.

According to a Eurobarometer published in September 2025,³⁵ the vast majority of Croatian citizens support Montenegro's accession to the European Union. As many as 68 percent of respondents expressed support, while 28 percent were opposed. Among all countries seeking EU membership, Croatian citizens most strongly support the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina (74 percent), followed by Montenegro, Ukraine, and Kosovo.

Parliamentary parties in Croatia generally affirm Montenegro's European path, while at the same time condemning provocations from the Montenegrin side, such as the aforementioned resolution on Jasenovac, and expressing concern over the influence of Serbian authorities on Montenegrin politics. Due to this ambivalence, Croatia's blocking of Chapter 31 did not provoke strong reactions of either support or opposition among opposition parties. In addition to the HDZ, whose positions on this issue are articulated primarily through the Prime Minister and ministers, Ivica Kukavica from the ruling coalition party Homeland Movement warned that Croatia's "reservations" regarding Chapter 31 represent only the beginning. "I fear that relations between Croatia and Montenegro are heading towards a point of no return... I want this to be heard in Podgorica and Belgrade,"³⁶ he stated. Even the representative of the Serbian minority, Milorad Pupovac (SDSS), commented on the decision of the Montenegrin parliament by saying: "None of the resolutions are to our liking or close to our hearts."³⁷

On the other end of the political spectrum, Tonino Picula (SDP), who has been significantly involved in EU enlargement processes in the past, expressed concern over the strengthening of historical revisionism in Montenegro and the influence of Belgrade on its internal politics.³⁸ The President of the Parliamentary Committee for European Affairs, Jelena Milos (Mozemo), told us that it is extremely important to refocus attention on the enlargement process and the countries of the Western Balkans, and that Croatia should continue to provide strong support for their EU accession. She called for "refraining from political provocations and calming the tensions we have witnessed recently, which have damaged relations between Croatia and Montenegro."

³³ Sandra Veljkovic, „Crna Gora naučila lekciju: Prihvaca Povjerenstvo za povrat broda Jadran“ (*Montenegro Learned Its Lesson: Accepts the Commission for the Return of the Ship Jadran*), Večernji list, 12 January 2026. Available at: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/crna-gora-naucila-lekciju-prihvaca-povjerenstvo-za-povrat-broda-jadran-1923562> Accessed on: 16 January 2026.

³⁴ „MVP koordinira procesom rješavanja otvorenih pitanja sa Hrvatskom“ (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs Coordinates the Process of Resolving Open Issues with Croatia*), Dan. Available at: [DAH - MVP koordinira procesom rješavanja otvorenih pitanja sa Hrvatskom](https://www.dan.hr/vijesti/mvp-koordinira-procesom-rjesavanja-otvorenih-pitanja-sa-hrvatskom), Accessed on: 2 February 2026.

³⁵ Attitudes towards EU Enlargement. Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3413> Accessed on: 24 January 2026.

³⁶ I.D., „KUKAVICA: Nikad vise necemo dopustiti da Crna Gora bude platforma za napad na Hrvatsku“ (*Kukavica: We Will Never Again Allow Montenegro to Be a Platform for Attacks on Croatia*), Dalmatinski portal, 14 January 2025. Available at: <https://dalmatinskiportal.hr/vijesti/kukavica--nikad-vise-necemo-dopustiti-da-crna-gora-bude-platforma-za-napad-na-hrvatsku/225776> Accessed on: 16 January 2026.

³⁷ Hina, „Pupovac govorio o rezoluciji o Jasenovcu pa spominjao ZDS. Bulj ga napao“ (*Pupovac Spoke About the Jasenovac Resolution and Mentioned ZDS; Bulj Attacked Him*), Index HR, 2 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/pupovac-nijedna-rezolucija-nam-nije-po-mjeri-ni-po-srcu/2578818.aspx>. Accessed on: 16 January 2026.

³⁸ Bojan Djuriscic, „Picula: Sa cetnickim vojvodama se ne ulazi u EU, bili oni zivi ili ne“ (*Picula: One Does Not Enter the EU with Chetnik Commanders, Alive or Dead*), Pobjeda, 8 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/picula-sa-cetnickim-vojvodama-se-ne-ulazi-u-eu-bili-oni-zivi-ili-ne>. Accessed on: 16 January 2026.

5. Space for the (mis)use of open issues in the EU integration process

Good neighbourly relations occupy a central place in the European Union's enlargement policy and represent one of the key prerequisites for stability, trust, and sustainable peace between states. However, the experience of enlargement in the Western Balkans shows that they are not only an important instrument of European integration, but also a field of intense politicisation.

The EU's approach in this area can be observed through several recurring patterns: assuming a central role in facilitating dialogue (as in the cases of Belgrade–Pristina and North Macedonia–Greece); providing declarative political support and technical assistance while leaving solutions to bilateral channels (as in the border dispute between Montenegro and Croatia); or aligning itself more closely with the interests of individual member states (as in the case of Bulgaria and North Macedonia).³⁹

The veto power vested in member states, combined with a series of contradictory precedents, has weakened confidence in the enlargement policy by creating a double asymmetry: regional actors are often insufficiently committed to constructive dispute resolution, while the EU fails to provide a consistent framework that would render the process predictable and fair.

It is a fact that decades of a lack of systematic confrontation – by both war and post-war generations in Montenegro – with the country's role in acts committed by its citizens on the battlefield around Dubrovnik (as discussed in the first part of this publication) created fertile ground for attempts at historical revisionism, the strengthening of nationalist agendas, and overt political provocations at the moment of a change of government.

It is also a fact that a significant part of the Montenegrin government, as well as a segment of the population influenced by it, harbours a certain degree of intolerance toward Croatia; that there are persistent attempts to return to the policies Montenegro pursued in the early 1990s; and that some actors operate from positions of Greater-Serbian nationalism under the strong influence of Aleksandar Vucic, who does not conceal his role in this regard. It is equally a fact that the adoption of the resolution represents a direct political provocation toward Croatia that cannot remain without a response.

At the same time, it remains true that a potential decision by Croatia to block the closure of negotiation chapters would unjustifiably affect the vast majority of Montenegrin citizens who respect the Croatian state and sincerely advocate for EU membership. The decision of the strongest political party (PES) to allow the majority of its MPs to support the resolution under political pressure was neither prudent nor statesmanlike; however, this does not qualify that political structure as an actor pursuing an anti-Croatian agenda, particularly given that MPs from the Croatian national community are represented within its parliamentary group.

³⁹ Milica Kovacevic, *Dobrosusjedstvo na Zapadnom Balkanu: Bilateralni sporovi i politike koje ih odrzavaju (Good Neighbourly Relations in the Western Balkans: Bilateral Disputes and State-Level Politics That Perpetuate Them)*, Centar za demokratsku tranziciju. Available at: <https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Dobrosusjedstvo-na-Zapadnom-Balkanu-1.pdf>. Accessed on: 19 January 2026.

Until 2024, Croatian diplomacy legitimately and credibly positioned itself as a country that “opens the region’s door to the West.” Recent steps, however, suggest a possible shift toward a role that risks creating an “iron curtain” for the Western Balkans – specifically for Montenegro. Current statements and actions by the Croatian government and parts of the ruling coalition increasingly resemble an approach similar to that adopted by Slovenia during its dispute with Croatia, rather than one of support and facilitation.

It appears that Croatian diplomacy is employing a tactic of intertwining accession criteria with bilateral issues in order to generate additional political pressure. An illustrative example is the recent statement by Gordan Grlic Radman that the issue of Croatian property in Montenegro is not a bilateral matter, but rather a question of the status and position of the Croatian minority, falling under Chapter 23 – rule of law, fundamental rights, and the judiciary. “What concerns us here is a political act that affects the position and status of the Croatian community and is, in fact, discriminatory...,”⁴⁰ he stated. While minority rights are unquestionably part of the accession criteria and Chapter 23, this issue has not been raised in the European Commission’s reports on Montenegro to date, opening space for interpretations of the “European rules of the game” as an attempt to resolve outstanding bilateral disputes through the accession process.

Blocking Montenegro’s accession would almost certainly lead to additional nationalist mobilisation and would strengthen political forces in Montenegro that openly express nostalgia for the era of Slobodan Milosevic. Montenegro is currently the leading candidate among EU aspirants, and the failure of its primary foreign policy objective would represent a significant success for the policy of Aleksandar Vucic, who does not conceal his opposition to Montenegro joining the EU before Serbia.⁴¹ In such a scenario, Croatia would ultimately gain yet another problematic neighbour, which would run counter to its own national interests.

If Croatia conducts this process as a tactical manoeuvre aimed at improving its negotiating position vis-à-vis Montenegro, providing an adequate response to political provocations, and positioning itself as an important actor in the Western Balkans and the EU, a positive outcome remains possible. In this context, internal political dynamics within Croatia should not be underestimated, as right-wing parties may use such situations to mobilise public support.

Finally, the role of the European Union itself must not be overlooked. Whatever approach it adopts in mediating a potential escalation of the dispute between Croatia and Montenegro, the EU will need to evolve toward a policy based on shared responsibility, predictable mediation, and credible support for regional reconciliation – while countries of the Western Balkans must abandon the practice of instrumentalising bilateral disputes for domestic political purposes. Only in this way can the principle of good neighbourliness once again become what it was intended to be: the foundation of a stable, solidaristic and integrated Europe.⁴²

⁴⁰ .D.H., „Grlic Radman: Situacija u Iranu se smiruje, Hrvati su sigurni“ (*Grlic Radman: The Situation in Iran Is Calming, Croats Are Safe*), HRT, 15 January 2026. Available at: <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/eu/gordan-grlic-radman-4-12522451>. Accessed on: 20 January 2026.

⁴¹ M.L.J., „Vucic bi da ceo Zapadni Balkan istovremeno udje u EU, Crnogorci kazu – cekamo vas tamo“ (*Vucic Wants the Entire Western Balkans to Enter the EU Simultaneously, Montenegrins Say – We’ll Be Waiting for You There*), Vreme, 10 December 2025. Available at: <https://vreme.com/vesti/vucic-poziva-zemlje-zapadnog-balkana-da-zajedno-udju-u-eu-crnogorci-kazu-cekamo-vas-tamo/>. Accessed on: 19 January 2026.

⁴² Milica Kovacevic, Dobrosusjedstvo na Zapadnom Balkanu: Bilateralni sporovi i politike koje ih održavaju (*Good Neighbourly Relations in the Western Balkans: Bilateral Disputes and State-Level Politics That Perpetuate Them*), Centar za demokratsku tranziciju. Available at: <https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Dobrosusjedstvo-na-Zapadnom-Balkanu-1.pdf>. Accessed on: 19 January 2026.

