

Speech by Prime Minister Milojko Spajic
Intergovernmental Conference on Accession of Montenegro
to the European Union, Brussels, 26 January 2026

Dear Commissioner Kos,
Dear Deputy minister Raouna,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am thrilled to be here with you only one month following the previous record-breaking December IGC with Montenegro! On behalf of our delegation and all our citizens, I am proud and grateful to see that together, as true partners, and thanks to the tireless work of you, your colleagues and capitals, this house and the Commission throughout the Holiday season, we are already now able to mark the beginning of the Cyprus Presidency with a clear affirmation of its priority of simultaneously strategically strengthening the autonomy of the European Union and demonstrating that it remains open to the wider world.

Chapter 32 belongs to the Fundamentals. By advancing decisively on financial control, Montenegro and the EU clearly demonstrate that *Fundamentals First* remains the guiding principle of EU enlargement policy. In these globally dizzying times, robust rule of law is the Alpha and the Omega of making the Union stronger by making it larger through the accession of thoroughly reformed new members. This sequencing is deliberate. Last year, Montenegro began its annual chapter-closing mission by first provisionally closing **Chapter 5** (Fundamentals as well). The symbolism of today, therefore, cannot be overstated. This crucial year for our accession and merit-based enlargement policy, we march on with determination by consolidating progress in yet another core Fundamentals chapter.

Can our institutions be trusted to manage public resources responsibly, protect taxpayers 'money, and safeguard the financial interests of the European Union? By provisionally closing this chapter and continuing to monitor and strengthen financial control in the run up to full membership, we manifest our political choice to anchor accession in reliability, integrity, accountability, and the rule of law - the foundations on which the trust of all our citizens in EU enlargement ultimately rests. Count on us to work around the clock and, with your guidance, not only begin, but also end this year with Fundamentals - by hopefully jointly concluding that the closing benchmarks in two key Fundamentals chapters have been met!

We see this chapter as one of the key tests of our credibility as the incoming member state. During the past 13 years of negotiations, sound financial control has evolved from an aspiration to reality. Over the past years, Montenegro has established a **robust public internal financial control system**, fully aligned with European standards. Managerial accountability is embedded across public administration, internal controls are operational, and internal audit functions work independently and professionally.

Beyond just formal alignment, this journey **reflects a genuine cultural shift** in how public funds are managed, protected, and accounted for. Thus, for example, practice shows that audit findings today translate into corrective action and accountability, not merely into recommendations. As once Montenegro's finance minister, I am deeply conscious of how financial control actively supports better decision-making, stronger institutions, and more responsible governance. That is why I am glad that this logic underpins the work of my Government. And I congratulate the Minister of Finance present here on continuing in the same vein and helping us reach today's milestone!

Our State Audit Institution plays a central role in this system. It operates as a strong, independent, and credible guardian of public finances. Its work is transparent, its findings are taken seriously, and parliamentary oversight is active and effective. It is also a clear indication of Montenegro's capacity to protect both national and future EU financial interests.

Equally important is the protection of the European Union's financial interests. Montenegro has established effective anti-fraud coordination mechanisms, ensured strong inter-institutional cooperation, and continues to strengthen administrative capacity. We are prepared to, as we already indeed do, cooperate fully and seamlessly with European partners, including OLAF, from the first day of membership. We follow the uncompromising work of the European Public Prosecutor's Office with profound respect and interest and stand ready to help there too whenever needed based on our existing Working arrangement.

We are aware that trust in financial governance is built gradually and is continuously tested. This is precisely why our system is now endowed with safeguards, transparency, and control mechanisms designed to reduce risk, not transfer it - and to ensure that continued monitoring, cooperation, and accountability remain its integral parts. Most importantly, we can definitely say that we moved beyond building frameworks. We are now strengthening performance and delivering measurable results.

This progress is the result of political commitment at the all levels, sustained institutional effort, and our whole society's clear strategic choice for Europe. As we embark on the tough but rewarding mission to make this year a historic success, we are encouraged by the recognition you give to our financial control, confident in our institutions, and firmly committed to the values we share with you. Montenegro has delivered on the Fundamentals, and we trust that in progress – and full membership - predicated on merit will in return be recognised accordingly.

This is our year – Yours and Ours! Let's show other candidates and the rest of the world how the EU can grow stronger and safer for its citizens, administrations, companies and investors.

Thank you.