



22nd meeting
Kings Park Hotel, Kralja Nikole, Podgorica,
24 April 2026

JOINT DECLARATION

The EU-Montenegro Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) enables civil society organisations from both sides to monitor Montenegro's progress towards joining the European Union and to make recommendations to the Montenegrin government and the EU institutions.

The JCC is made up of 12 members; six representing the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and six representing Montenegrin organised civil society. During its current term, it is co-chaired by **Danko Relić**, member of the Andrija Štampar Association of People's Health from Croatia, and **Srđa Keković**, Secretary General of the Union of Free Trade Unions of Montenegro (USSCG).

1. State of play of EU-Montenegro relations and the accession process, including the implementation of the reform agenda within the growth plan for the Western Balkans

1.1 The JCC welcomes the EU-Montenegro intergovernmental conferences held in January and March 2026, during which Montenegro provisionally **closed further chapters of negotiations** (Chapter 32 – Financial Control and Chapter 21 – Trans-European Networks), bringing the total number of provisionally closed chapters to 14 (out of 33). The JCC reaffirms its **full support for Montenegro's EU membership** and will continue to play a constructive role as the accession process enters its final stage. It urges the Montenegrin authorities to prioritise the remaining work, including the set benchmarks for closing the Fundamentals Cluster.

1.2 The JCC continues to urge all political actors in Montenegro to compromise and achieve **broad consensus to deliver on the EU-related reforms**. Members of the JCC encourage the continuous efforts of the Montenegrin government and institutions to **include organised civil society** in the EU accession process. They stress that this inclusion should be **genuine** and **without undue political influence and interference**.

1.3 The JCC welcomes the agreement within the Council of the EU to set-up the working group for the accession treaty with Montenegro and considers this an important step towards EU membership. It also urgently calls for a **coordinated and efficient communication strategy** that would objectively communicate EU enlargement within EU Member States, in close cooperation

with their organised civil societies. This is of crucial importance to prepare for a **smooth ratification procedure of the Accession Treaty**. Members of the JCC also reaffirm the vital role of organised civil society in fostering dialogue and trust to enhance regional stability and **good neighbourly relations**.

- 1.4 In line with the Montenegrin government's third semi-annual Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) Report and progress in implementing the **reform agenda**, the next disbursements of funds by the European Commission are expected. The JCC commends the practice of Montenegrin authorities to publish the semi-annual RGF reports, and stresses that the authorities should provide documented feedback on how input from organised civil society has been taken into account.
- 1.5 The JCC acknowledges that meetings of the RGF monitoring committee, whose role is to strengthen the implementation, coordination and oversight of the reform agenda, are taking place¹. The JCC stresses that participation of social partners and civil society organisations must go beyond consultation and ensure their **equal status** in monitoring and coordination bodies, in line with EU principles of social and civil dialogue and participatory governance.
- 1.6 The JCC welcomes the request to the EESC from the current Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU to prepare an **exploratory opinion on Civil Society's Role in Supporting Reform under the Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova, as well as in Ukraine's Reform Path**². It also welcomes the decision to involve **enlargement candidate members**³ from **Montenegro** actively in the drafting of this opinion. Once adopted, the JCC invites the Montenegrin authorities to examine its recommendations, together with the final declaration of the enhanced follow-up **EU-Western Balkans Civil Society Conference "Trust and Partnership at the Heart of EU Enlargement"** related to this opinion, which will take place in Vienna on 29 May 2026.

Specific sectoral recommendations

- 1.7 The JCC calls on the European Commission and the EU Member States, in dialogue with the authorities and social partners of Montenegro and other Western Balkan partners, to continue to engage on all possible solutions to the **operational challenges faced by professional truck drivers** from the region resulting from the introduction of the **EU Entry-Exit System**; notes that the introduction of the Entry-Exit System has led to protests and disruptions at several border crossings and risks negatively affecting trade flows and economic cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans.
- 1.8 The JCC expresses strong concern regarding the adoption of **amendments to the Law on Internal Affairs and the Law on the National Security Agency**, particularly in light of their

¹ The Monitoring Committee held its first meeting on 21 November 2025, with five representatives of organised civil society (per policy areas, selected based on the public call). The second Monitoring Committee was held on 21 April 2026 and representatives of organised civil society were invited to actively participate.

² [Civil Society's Role in Supporting Reform under the Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova, as well as in Ukraine's Reform Path | EESC.](#)

³ [Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative | EESC.](#)

potential implications for the rule of law, fundamental rights, and data protection standards. The JCC warns against the possible misuse of these legal mechanisms for political purposes, which would be contrary to European values and undermine democratic institutions. In this context, the JCC invites the European Commission to closely monitor their implementation and to assess its compliance with the EU acquis.

- 1.9 The JCC reiterates the need to establish a **legal framework (Law on the Review of the Origin of Assets) in order to enable the systematic confiscation of illegally acquired property**, thereby increasing the level of accountability through personal assets in identified cases of organised crime, money laundering, as well as damage caused to the state budget due to unlawful or unprofessional conduct of decision-makers at all levels.

The economic and social situation in Montenegro

- 1.10 The JCC notes that the Montenegrin economy is expected to continue growing by around **3% in 2026 and the following years**. However, this growth remains **largely driven by private consumption**, supported by wage increases, while **exports remain weak and investment performance uncertain**⁴. The JCC reiterates its concern that sustained real wage growth continues to outpace productivity growth, pointing to structural imbalances that may weigh on medium-term competitiveness.
- 1.11 The JCC takes note of signs of **easing inflationary pressure** at the beginning of 2026, while underlining the **risk of renewed inflation**, notably due to rising fuel prices. While there are signs of **relative stabilisation of the fiscal deficit and public debt**, the JCC stresses that fiscal risks persist, particularly in view of rising current expenditure and the long-term sustainability of public finances.
- 1.12 The JCC reiterates that the **business environment in Montenegro remains insufficiently predictable and constrained** by informal economy, regulatory and institutional shortcomings, insufficient enforcement capacity, corruption and tax non-compliance. It stresses that these factors continue to **undermine investment, productivity, growth and economic diversification**, and calls on the Montenegrin authorities to address them in a **structural and sustained manner**.
- 1.13 The JCC notes the continued **decline in unemployment** in 2026 to levels of around 9%, largely caused by employment in the public sector, while underlining that **persistent regional disparities and the lack of inclusion of vulnerable groups** remain a concern. At the same time, it stresses the need to **address long-term sustainability risks to social security systems**, particularly in light of the Europe Now 2 wage-reform package, including the abolition of health contributions and the reduction of pension contributions.

⁴ The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies: [Montenegro](#).

2. Implementation of obligations stemming from Chapter 19 – Social Policy and Employment

- 2.1 The JCC calls on the Montenegrin authorities to swiftly fulfil the three Chapter 19 benchmarks by strengthening inter-institutional coordination and ensuring the continued, meaningful involvement of social partners and relevant CSOs through a participatory Chapter 19 working group.
- 2.2 The JCC calls on the Montenegrin authorities to further reinforce efforts to:
- **strengthen the implementation and monitoring of employment and social inclusion policies** by improving inter-institutional coordination, establishing clear outcome-based indicators and ensuring systematic data collection;
 - **strengthen the Employment Agency and implement active labour market measures**, particularly for young people, women and vulnerable groups;
 - prepare the **institutional framework for future participation in the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**.
- 2.3 The JCC welcomes the adoption of the Action Plan on Labour Inspection and underlines the need to **reinforce administrative and institutional capacity in the areas of labour inspection and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and OSH systems** in order to ensure effective enforcement of labour legislation and enforcement of EU *acquis* on health and safety at work. In that context, the JCC calls on the Montenegrin government to urgently designate a competent reference body responsible for the recognition and systematic monitoring of occupational diseases, in line with EU standards.
- 2.4 The JCC expresses serious concern over the prolonged delays in the work of the socio-medical commissions in the field of **social protection**, whose findings and opinions are a prerequisite for decisions on entitlement to material benefits and related rights across various areas of life. This months-long standstill seriously jeopardizes the legal and social security of numerous vulnerable groups and beneficiaries of social protection rights, and negatively affects the stability of income, and the livelihoods of individuals and families. For this reason, the JCC calls on the competent institutions **to ensure regular, timely, and unhindered access to rights**, as well as action **within the legally prescribed deadlines**.
- 2.5 The JCC welcomes the launch of the process to amend key social policy laws, with a view to strengthening fairness and addressing existing shortcomings and potential misuse and calls on the Montenegrin institutions to more adequately involve civil society, especially the representatives elected to the working groups, throughout all amendments that are forwarded for further procedure and adoption. The JCC invites the Montenegrin Government to accelerate work, in close cooperation with the Social Council, towards legislative alignment with the EU *acquis* in the area of **labour, occupational health and safety, gender equality, child protection and anti-discrimination**.
- 2.6 The JCC calls for the Montenegrin government to **promote tripartite social dialogue at all levels**, including **collective bargaining** in sectors that remain uncovered by collective agreements. The JCC invites the Montenegrin authorities to effectively consult the Social Council, the Chamber of Economy of Montenegro and all relevant stakeholders on all relevant

new legislative acts and their amendments. Members of the JCC once again stress that the social partners' common agreements reached in the Social Council should be duly taken into account, including when it comes to work arrangements, such as those stipulated in the **Law on Internal Trade** regarding work on Sunday.

- 2.7 The JCC repeats its call to the Montenegrin Government to amend all relevant legislation in order to **clearly define the exception provision for representatives of the social partners and civil society organisations who are members of the working groups and other bodies**, as well as management boards, from being treated as public officials and thus avoid any future misinterpretations.
- 2.8 The JCC stresses the need to intensify efforts to combat discrimination and social exclusion of vulnerable groups and minorities by ensuring effective implementation of existing strategies, adequate funding and concrete measures to improve access to education, health care, employment, cultural rights and protection from hate speech and hate-motivated violence⁵.
- 2.9 The JCC calls on the Montenegrin authorities to ensure the full institutional, financial and **operational independence of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms (Ombudsman)**, notably with regard to staff recruitment and budgetary autonomy, in line with European standards for equality bodies, so as to strengthen the effective protection against discrimination and the promotion of human rights for all⁶.
3. **Coordination of Structural Instruments and preparations for the next multiannual financial framework (MFF)**
 - 3.1 The JCC calls on the Montenegrin authorities to **further strengthen coordination mechanisms for EU funds**, including clear allocation of responsibilities and effective inter-institutional cooperation, in order to **improve planning, programming and implementation** of Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) assistance and to prepare for future participation in European Structural and Investment Funds.
 - 3.2 The JCC underlines the importance of **reinforcing administrative capacity at central, local and sectoral levels**, notably through staff retention, targeted training and continuity of expertise, to **ensure effective absorption of EU funds** and readiness for the requirements of the next multiannual financial framework.
 - 3.3 The JCC stresses the need to **enhance strategic, multi-annual programming and project pipelines** aligned with EU policy priorities, including cohesion policy objectives, in order to maximise the impact of EU financial assistance and ensure timely and proper implementation of programmes. It welcomes the public call for nominations of representatives of civil society organisations, including business associations, for participation in the working groups for the

⁵ [ECRI Report on Montenegro](#), July 2025.

⁶ [ECRI Report on Montenegro](#), July 2025.

development of the strategic planning document and programming of the cohesion policy chapters within the National and Regional Partnership Plan.

- 3.4 The JCC calls for **strengthened transparency, monitoring and financial control systems in the management of EU funds**, in line with EU standards, as a prerequisite for increased trust, sound financial management and Montenegro's gradual transition from pre-accession funding towards full benefit of EU funds under a future MFF.

4. **Overview of the situation of organised civil society in Montenegro**

- 4.1 The JCC calls for enhanced transparency, legal certainty and inclusiveness in all legislative processes affecting civil society, notably with regard to the **Draft Law on Non-Governmental Organisations**, including clear justification of proposed measures, meaningful public consultation, and the definition of key funding criteria and procedures in primary legislation rather than through easily amendable secondary acts. It expresses concern that some articles of the latest draft law are **potentially contrary to the Convention and case law of the European Court of Human Rights**, with possible negative implications on freedom of association, and invites the Montenegrin government to reconsider its position in this regard.

- 4.2 The JCC stresses the importance of **safeguarding the independence and autonomy of civil society organisations** by preventing institutional pressure, selective state support and ad hoc decision-making, and by ensuring conditions that allow civil society to act freely, critically and effectively as a watchdog and contributor to public policy. Members of the JCC stress that civil society organisations should learn about consultation opportunities well in advance, and should receive feedback about whether and how their comments have been taken into account.

- 4.3 The JCC welcomes the resumption of the work of the **Council for Cooperation between Government Institutions and CSOs**. The JCC invites the Montenegrin Government to convene regular meetings of the renewed Council, to effectively monitor the implementation of the 2022-2026 strategy for cooperation with CSOs and its 2024-2026 action plan. It also asks that the new strategy for 2027-2031 that is currently being developed fully reflects the recent **EU strategy for civil society**.

- 4.4 The JCC notes the **high level of public trust in civil society organisations**, as confirmed by a recent public opinion survey⁷, and underlines that this trust calls for safeguarding civic space, **ensuring the genuine and systematic involvement of civil society in policy-making**, and recognising civil society organisations as substantive contributors rather than formal or symbolic stakeholders.

- 4.5 While pleased that the Law on Amendments to the **Law on Free Access to Information** was finally adopted at the end of 2025, the JCC calls on the Montenegrin authorities to further strengthen this law by **removing provisions that undermine effective judicial protection and discourage the use of legal remedies**. At the same time, the JCC calls for active promotion of

⁷ [MNE Pulse public opinion survey \(December 2025\)](#), conducted by the Centre for Civic Education (CGO) and the DAMAR Institute, indicating that civil society organisations are among the most positively perceived social actors in Montenegro.

the practical implementation of the law through support for capacity-building, open data initiatives and the effective use of access-to-information mechanisms by civil society and media.

- 4.6 The JCC renews its call on the European Commission and the Montenegrin authorities to ensure sufficient **financial and technical support for training and capacity building of social partners and civil society organisations**, particularly to enable their participation in monitoring and coordinating activities related to the implementation of the reform agenda.

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This joint declaration was adopted by consensus. The JCC instructs its co-chairs to forward it to the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Council, the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission and the Montenegrin Government.

The next meeting will be held in the EU in the second half of 2026. The agenda for the next meeting will be set by the co-chairs of this body. Among other topics, it will feature an assessment of the enabling environment for civil society and social dialogue.
