

Is Minority Protection Still an EU Criterion for Enlargement Countries? Minority Struggles in Montenegro in the Shadow of Geopolitical Pressures

Rina Muhaj

DOI: 10.25430/pupj-PHRG-2026-1-4

How to cite:

Muhaj R. (2026) 'Is Minority Protection Still an EU Criterion for Enlargement Countries? Minority Struggles in Montenegro in the Shadow of Geopolitical Pressures', *Peace Human Rights Governance*, 10(1), 89-123.

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Is Minority Protection Still an EU Criterion for Enlargement Countries? Minority Struggles in Montenegro in the Shadow of Geopolitical Pressures

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Abstract

Montenegro is considered the frontrunner in the process of European Union accession. Yet, despite progress in negotiations, the country in recent years has not been immune to the turbulent dynamics that have engulfed both the region and the wider international order. Paradoxically, Montenegro's integration path has advanced in parallel with worrying signs of regression in core democratic and human rights standards. Deep societal polarization, ethno-nationalist rhetoric, fragile institutions, and pronounced populist politics illustrate how the country shifts between antagonistic geopolitical poles. For Montenegro's minorities, European integration has long been understood not only as a political project, but also as a cultural shelter. As communities embodying the EU's motto "united in diversity," minorities have made an immeasurable contribution to Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. Despite their contribution to the major state building processes, there is nevertheless a perception that minorities have not received their equal and deserved place in country's society. European regional regimes, most notably the Council of Europe, the European Union and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, have played a crucial role in securing legislative guarantees and institutional mechanisms for minority protection. However, recent reports by civil society and international organizations point to regression in practice. Interethnic tensions, hate speech, historical revisionism and weakened institutional safeguards reveal a paradox: Montenegro is moving forward in accession negotiations while sliding backwards in the protection of minorities. The paper argues that minority protection in enlargement countries cannot be regarded as a criterion that has already been fulfilled or one that requires little further attention. On the contrary, it remains a fragile and contested domain that demands continuous monitoring, reinforcement, and prioritization. In Montenegro, minority voices, although present, are often sidelined or passive at moments when they should be central in a multiethnic society committed to protecting democratic values and equality. This situation illustrates both the paradox of enlargement and the urgent need to revitalize multilateral mechanisms that place minority protection back at the heart of European integration.

Keywords: *Minority protection, EU enlargement, democratic backsliding, geopolitics*

* Rina Muhaj, UN OHCHR Fellow. Email:rinamuhaj@gmail.com

Introduction

Since the establishment of the European Union, the issue of minority rights has been an integral part of the values, principles and norms upon which this community has been founded. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, and the wars of independence within the federal units of the Soviet Union and particularly of the former Yugoslavia, were geopolitical turning points that reminded the Union that the question of minorities on the continent required a more consolidated political and normative agenda. It also had to become a defining component of the political identity of this newly established entity, which aimed to extend its borders eastward.

In fact, this was a natural outcome of the new circumstances created in the international order after the closure of the bipolar system of the Cold War, during which the international community had developed human rights frameworks primarily around the individual, rather than groups, since minorities until then had not yet achieved full subjectivity in the group context. Thus, during the first half of the 1990s, which was the period of consolidation of the international system for the protection of minorities, at the regional level, the European system for minority protection emerged from a multidimensional network of key regional actors: the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the European Union. The first two provided national minorities in Europe with a legal framework for their rights, while the European Union approached the issue more politically, presenting the protection of minorities as a condition for any state aspiring to join the organization. Consequently, the EU's contribution is often seen as resting in its politically oriented protection of minorities, focusing primarily on the obligations of states, in such a way that membership was conditioned upon the implementation of the political standards imposed on them regarding the respect of minority rights.

The transition of post-communist societies toward democracy, based on the protection of human and minority rights, implicitly represented the process of integration toward the European Union - a process that would be considered "complete" the moment these countries became members of this entity. The Copenhagen Criteria emerged only after the fall of the Berlin Wall and became applicable solely to new aspirants - meaning, the former communist states. Yet, since their introduction in 1993, the question of the Copenhagen Criteria has often raised dilemmas regarding the fulfillment of such standards by member states that were never required to undergo such an integration process. Consequently, since the very inauguration of the EU, one of the most recurrent debates concerning minority rights as a criterion for enlargement has been accompanied by the ironic question: how is that

the states of Eastern and Southeastern Europe have to go through a longer path and meet double standards, particularly minority rights, which EU itself doesn't meet?

The questioning of the European Union's political identity - as a community of democracies founded on the protection of human and minority rights - and the credibility of the enlargement process with transitional states, has been the result of geopolitical influence upon it. As Lehne explains, the geopolitical dimension has always been present in the EU's enlargements (Lehne, 2025). Being itself a geopolitical project of Western Europe opposing Russian influence, the EU enlargement eventually filled the space left by the collapse of the Soviet Empire. However, unlike the enlargements involving post-communist states, geopolitics had previously remained in the background, since the progress of candidate states was mostly measured by economic interest, and the key global players were either supportive (the United States) or passive (the Soviet Union) (Lehne, 2025).

The 2004 "Big Bang" enlargement, and especially that of 2007, brought the greatest demographic diversity to the European Union. Despite the conditionality of the Copenhagen Criteria, the way these criteria were applied during the accession process, including the issue of minority rights, challenged the belief that EU accession is a purely technical, merit-based process. The experience of several countries has shown that, as a report by the Open Society Institute notes, "governments of candidate states have viewed their efforts to demonstrate compliance with the political criteria instrumentally, rather than as a genuine and lasting commitment. For instance, a Bulgarian official recently observed that candidate governments 'think in terms of closing chapters, not solving problems'" (Open Society Institute, 2002, p. 17). Throughout its various stages, the accession process has demonstrated that it is both technical and political, and that the correlation between these two approaches depends largely on the geopolitical moment in which the Union finds itself. In times of geopolitical tension, the process becomes increasingly political, and concerns previously raised toward candidate states "suddenly" appear to be resolved.

Today, the enlargement process faces a situation contrary to that described by Lehne during the Cold War. Russia now plays an active obstructive role in the enlargement process; the United States, during the Trump administration, drifted toward a more passive stance; and a new actor has joined this geopolitical landscape - China. This intensity of geopolitical developments has brought the issue of enlargement back to the center of the EU agenda, after having long remained on the margins, particularly for the Western Balkans. The reasons lie both in internal and external developments

- from the 2008 financial crisis, internal delays and European Council vetoes, to the democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans - all of which have contributed to the stagnation of this process. Candidate countries have been left waiting, partly due to fears that their accession in their current state could further weaken the EU itself (European Parliament, 2025, p. 6). While the EU maintains that problems must be resolved before accession, candidate countries often perceive EU membership as the very solution to these problems. The Union hesitates to “import” issues such as interethnic conflicts or strained relations, while candidate states often consider these to be settled once they join the EU.

Today, both internal and external crises have deepened. The rise of the right wing, populist politics, anti-migrant rhetoric, and democratic backsliding within the EU have fueled growing opposition to further enlargement. However, as a consequence of increasing Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Balkans, the EU has recognized the risk of “losing” the region - and with it, the credibility of its enlargement policy (European Parliament, 2025, p. 7). Acknowledging these risks led to the adoption of the new enlargement methodology in 2020, which placed fundamental rights, including minority rights, at the core of the integration process. The new methodology reaffirmed the EU’s commitment to strengthening democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Nevertheless, it was the outbreak of the war in Ukraine that became the turning point, convincing the EU that the enlargement process needed to be accelerated and made more effective in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Among all EU candidate countries, Montenegro today stands closer than ever to the European Union and simultaneously, closer than ever to pro-Russian forces. Interethnic tensions, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the questioning of the country’s civic character, and divisive social narratives that have eroded human and minority rights compel us to rethink the very meaning and effect of the EU’s current integration approach: Is the issue of minority rights truly a *conditio sine qua non* for becoming part of the European family - or an instrumentally employed issue, overshadowed by geopolitical priorities?

1.1. Democratic Backsliding Amid EU Integration: Can It Really Happen?

Isn’t the EU about democracy? Is it possible for a country to move closer to the EU while simultaneously moving away from it in terms of democratic consolidation? Is this, in fact, an indicator of the state of democracy within the European Union itself?

The paradox of developments in Montenegro has often been at the center of attention for various critical analysts, who have emphasized the EU's failure to strengthen the foundations of a democratic system in a country that aspires to join it. However, to truly understand the paradox of developments in Montenegro, it cannot be treated separately from the broader evolution of paradoxes within democracy itself in the EU, more widely in the West, and across the world.

What is happening to democracy today? Where do democratic models stand today, and how does the undermining of democracy affect the global order built on the principles of protecting human rights and freedoms?

Democratic backsliding, hybrid regimes, crises of democracy, authoritarianism, polarization, and populism are terms most frequently encountered today in political analyses of the region, the European Union, and the world at large. As phenomena closely intertwined with one another, they have attracted the attention of many authors who attempt to unpack the complexity they carry and their increasingly frequent presence. Numerous studies have been conducted to understand the root causes, indicators, factors, and warning signs of democratic erosion. The more we delve into such studies, the more we grasp the complexity of the process. There is no single diagnosis that fits all case studies. In some instances, it presents different signs; in others, it reveals new ones; and in yet others, a combination of both. Nevertheless, in most cases today, every instance of democratic backsliding shares one common point - ironically, it occurs in a democratic manner.

"Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box," observe authors Levitsky and Ziblatt (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 5). We recall that the ballot box is a symbol of democracy, and the vote is its primary democratic instrument. How can it be that the vote simultaneously becomes a tool for the destruction of democracy? As two of the central authors who have studied how democracies die today - a process that no longer occurs in an overt and dramatic way such as through coups, but in a more subtle yet equally destructive manner, not driven by generals but by democratically elected leaders (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 3) - democracy increasingly reveals a side that allows its opponents to dismantle it, and to do so democratically. This process is usually referred to as "backsliding," which, according to authors Haggard and Kaufman, denotes the "incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader" (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 1). Similarly, as Przeworski defines, it is a "process of gradual erosion of democratic institutions and norms" (Przeworski, 2019, p. 172), or, as Bermeo puts it, the "debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5).

To understand how backsliding occurs is not so simple, since as a process it is not easily detectable. It is a process which, as Bermeo notes, has been used very frequently lately, yet is rarely analyzed due to the breadth of the concept (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5). Today, democracy is attacked gradually, through actions that in essence do not appear undemocratic, but rather enjoy full legitimacy. Indeed, in the rhetoric of the leaders who carry them out, these moves are made in the name of democracy itself - for fighting corruption, improving living standards, or strengthening institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 77). As Levitsky & Ziblatt note: "One of the great ironies of how democracies die is that the very defense of democracy is often used as a pretext for its subversion" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 92).

The effects of such democratically legitimate actions on the system itself and on democratic values are usually observed later, and often this risks happening quite late, according to the parable of the "frog in the pot" (Przeworski, 2019, p. 176), after leaders have already captured the institutions. They are often referred to as "referees" of the game (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 92). By capturing the referees of the game, they ensure that advantages are given to the ruling side, eventually even changing the rules of the game in their favor. In this way, the "independent agency" of democracy - the judiciary, independent democratic institutions, and the media - becomes captured. At their helm come "loyalists," who begin to act under the political influence of a new establishment, the early signs of whose authoritarianism are observed when independent institutions begin to lose their voice, and their mandate of control and oversight over government policies gradually fades until it disappears entirely. In this gradual manner, we arrive at what Haggard and Kaufman call the "collapse of the separation of powers" (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 40). All of this occurs in a legitimate way. As Przeworski notes, very often government decisions and initiatives are, in principle, fully democratic. They are carried out in full accordance with the constitution and do not violate the laws of the country. The issue lies not in the means used, but in the purpose - the institutional and legal mechanisms are used for undemocratic ends, and precisely here lies the greatest challenge: the invisibility of intentions (Przeworski, 2019, p. 182).

There are cases when, even as authoritarian actions become visible, they are accepted by public opinion. This happens especially in times of crisis. Whether economic in nature or related to national security, citizens often believe that only authoritarian measures can provide the appropriate response to overcome such crises (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 192). This then leads us to another question that Svoboda raises: how much voters actually care about democracy? As he notes, people trade off democratic principles for partisan interests (Svoboda, 2019, p. 24). This trade off of democratic principles is more

prevalent in polarized democracies, which in fact represents an important factor explaining how polarization weakens democracy and pushes it towards democratic backsliding (Svolik, 2019, p. 27).

But how can we understand that this is actually happening? How can we determine whether what is occurring is simply a crisis, whether we are in a process of backsliding, or whether we have reached authoritarianism? According to Przeworski, the signs that we may be experiencing a crisis include: (1) the rapid erosion of traditional party systems; (2) the rise of xenophobic, racist, and nationalistic parties and attitudes; and (3) the decline in support for “democracy” in public opinion surveys (Przeworski, 2019, p. 83).

The erosion of traditional party systems and the decline in support for democracy can be closely related to what Müller calls “the broken promises of democracy.” Like folkloric promises that were given and never fulfilled, societies often come to believe that they are in fact impossible (Müller, 2016, p. 76). In post-communist societies, there existed great enthusiasm for democracy after the collapse of the communist system. The disappointment they later experienced, and the crises they faced, have led to a noticeable decline in support for the traditional parties that had promised democracy with the emergence of the pluralist system. Przeworski also observes that traditional parties have lost electoral support, while the rise of the right has become increasingly prominent. “When people believe that all professional politicians are the same, self-serving, dishonest, or corrupt, they turn against them whether they locate themselves on the left, right, or center” (Przeworski, 2019, p. 92). They do not necessarily follow clear ideological lines, as their vote is more often cast to punish rather than to support. This moment is often also seized by new political forces that emerge within a country.

In a democracy that initially appeared promising and later disappointing, the emerged new political movements within the country usually claim to represent “the people”. They promise to return sovereignty to the people instead of the corrupt elites who have captured every segment of power. These movements adopt a strategy of gaining power known as “populism”. Przeworski refers to populism as the “ideological twin of neo-liberalism.” The former sees the people as the regulator of the social order, the latter the market, but neither leaves space for institutions in this process (Przeworski, 2019, p. 87). As leaders who claim to represent the people, including marginalized groups, and to change a system that serves the elite, populists tend to present themselves as the most appropriate choice that will finally put an end to a corrupt system and a captured state (Levitsky & Ziblatt, *How democracies die*, 2018, p. 22). These political subjects always speak the language of democracy and promise the highest democratic ideals - to

return power to the people (Müller, 2016, p. 6). However, it is important to emphasize that not every anti-elitist is necessarily a populist. The key difference is that populists, in addition to being anti-elitist, are also anti-pluralist. They delegitimize all other political subjects, presenting themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the people, since any alternative political option is seen as nothing more than another replacement of corrupt elites (Müller, 2016, pp. 19-20).

Populist rhetoric tends to be more successful in polarized environments. These interconnected phenomena operate in a vicious circle that reinforces one another. When polarization is understood as a factual condition of a society that creates dividing lines, populism emerges as a strategy that operates within this created space. In general, there is a scholarly consensus that societal polarization represents the greatest threat to democracy. The fragmentation of society opens the way to democratic backsliding. In moments of societal division, populism becomes the strongest instrument for gaining power.

Polarization implies fragmentation and a breakdown of social cohesion, which can emerge, develop, and deepen on various grounds. In addition to class-based divisions, these may be racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious. "Ethnic, racial, and religious cleavages and fissures between cosmopolitan and nationalist worldviews can be equally, if not more potent, sources of mass polarization" (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 5). Societal polarization increasingly mobilizes masses around political movements that claim to represent their interests. They continuously reinforce narratives of identity and belonging among their electorate. This is closely related to the second indicator of democratic crisis defined by the author: the rise of xenophobic, racist, and nationalistic parties and attitudes. Polarization creates homogeneous groups that develop antagonistic relationships toward one another. The issue of migration has been one of the key drivers of polarization and democratic regression, alongside internal economic crises in different parts of the world, Europe, and America. As a result, support for centrist forces declines, paving the way for authoritarian tendencies to gain power (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 6).

Until recently, it may have been assumed that democracies with the longest constitutional traditions were immune to such challenges. However, recent developments have shown that even the most consolidated democratic foundations can be easily shaken. In such conditions, what can be said about the democratic stability of countries with relatively recent democratic traditions, such as post-communist states? How does democratic backsliding unfold across countries?

The case of the United States under the Trump administration is one of the best examples that democracy cannot be taken for granted. Hungary and Poland are also key examples that challenge the belief that the European Union is a safeguard of democracy. Hungary is the most striking example of illiberal democracy, significantly influenced by Russia.

It is therefore important to emphasize external actors that influence democratic backsliding. The tendencies toward it are not always strengthened from within; in many cases, they operate as an extended arm of influential actors who ensure that leaders with populist and authoritarian potential are brought under their patronage. Democratic backsliding and authoritarianism have a domino effect. Authoritarian regimes do not remain passive. They also pursue an external strategy aimed at spreading their own models abroad (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 79). Russia illustrates this most clearly through its influence on the democratic regression of Hungary and the EU, and more recently also in the Western Balkans.

1.2. Beyond Theoretical Approach: How Democratic Backsliding Unfolds in Montenegro?

In a report published by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) on authoritarian influence in the Western Balkans, Montenegro is examined as a “test case” of these recent efforts (Marković, 2024). In another brief published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, it is described as “one of Russia’s laboratories for malign influence” (Conley & Melino, May 2019, p. 4).

As a small country, but one of geopolitical importance for external actors, the spread of authoritarian influence has taken various forms, while the main influencing actors have been Russia and China. Russia, with which Montenegro historically developed very close ties in the past, has manifested its presence in the new world order primarily through foreign direct investment. It is one of the main foreign investors in Montenegro, and at the same time, together with Serbia, is also among the key contributors to the country’s tourism industry, which is Montenegro’s main economic sector (Stankov, 2023, p. 8). However, its interest has increasingly taken on a political dimension, facilitated in particular by the situation within the country. As a deeply polarized society, especially along ethnic and religious lines, characterized by corruption and weak institutional capacity to resist foreign malign influence, Russia has made use of this fertile ground. Thus, it has expanded its presence not only in the economic dimension, but increasingly in the cultural and religious one, with the potential of turning it into a “sphere of influence”.

As an amplifier of Russian interests in Montenegro, Serbia has played a key role, strengthening Kremlin influence through networks of pro-Serbian forces in the country. This has been instrumentalized through financial support to certain political parties, interference in elections, media influence, as well as the establishment of Serbian cultural institutions (Marković, 2024, p. 1). The intention to strengthen the Serbian cultural element in the country is evidenced by the Serbian government's investment in the establishment of cultural centers for Serbs, namely the "Serbian Houses", which also serve as soft power mechanisms for foreign policy objectives. For example, in 2017 the Serbian government invested 3.4 million euros in the establishment of the Serbian House in Podgorica (Marković, 2024, p. 7). Pro-Russian and pro-Serbian influence has also been exercised through certain media outlets that have supported pro-Serbian political actors during electoral campaigns, through control of part of the telecommunications market such as MTEL as part of the Serbian state telecom system, as well as through online social networks which actively disseminate Russian and Serbian propaganda within public opinion in the country (Marković, 2024, p. 8).

A particularly important role in channeling Russian and Serbian influence is played by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Due to its traditionally close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, this institution has reflected significant Serbian and Russian political, cultural, and religious influence in Montenegro. The Russian Orthodox Church often presents itself as the primary defender of the traditional boundaries of Pan-Slavism and the Orthodox world. In this context, the Serbian Orthodox Church has served as the main institutional vehicle for carrying out this mission of protecting Orthodox tradition in the country, enjoying religious legitimacy and a more favorable position in fulfilling this role, unlike the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which lacks canonical recognition from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The refusal to recognize the autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church by the Serbian Church leadership has often also implied a denial of the separate national identity of Montenegrins. Serbian Orthodox Church has opposed both Montenegro's independence and its membership in NATO (Stankov, 2023, p. 10). It has consistently followed a narrative line of defending a unified Slavic Orthodox identity in Montenegro, according to which Serbs and Montenegrins constitute a single national entity. During a visit in Montenegro, Serbian Patriarch Irinej stated that: "we are one nation, although we are divided" (Conley & Melino, May 2019, p. 2). Its role in shaping the political dynamics in the country was best demonstrated after the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, when for two consecutive years it organized protests against the law and mobilized supporters from political parties as well as the broader public, which led to the fall of the 30-

year rule of the DPS. The first prime minister was proposed by the Serbian Orthodox Church itself, while the agreement on forming the government with coalition partners was reached at the Ostrog Monastery with the participation of representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church (Stankov, 2023, p. 10).

All these mechanisms have significantly affected the already fragile democratic order in the country. Nevertheless, the risk of authoritarianism did not begin in 2020. Elements of authoritarian tendencies are a legacy of the previous regime, which maintained power under the guise of promoting Montenegrin civic identity, democratic rhetoric, and a pro-European and pro-Western orientation. The introduction of democracy in Montenegro after the fall of the monist system allowed one political party to take ownership of democratic ideals, creating a political regime which, in Bieber's description, is defined as "pioneering semi-authoritarian control with pro-reform discourse and strong external support" (Bieber, 2020, p. 42). In the policy analysis discourse on the Western Balkans, such a regime has often also been referred to as a "stabilocracy," a system that contains elements of semi-authoritarianism but is governed by a pro-democratic and reform-oriented rhetoric, along with strong support from European allies (Bieber, 2018). This policy approach has enabled the ruling party to create what is often described as a "captured state," highly centralized, in which power is concentrated in the hands of the executive branch, while the judiciary is transformed into a satellite branch of the executive, rendering the system of checks and balances dysfunctional, in order to ensure long-term retention of power. All of this is facilitated by a pro-Western foreign policy orientation and close alliances and partnerships with Western countries, which has been used primarily to legitimize itself as the only viable alternative offering stability and future prospects within the Euro-Atlantic family.

The year 2020, which marks a turning point in the country, has led to divergent interpretations. On the one hand, it has been perceived with fear and caution as a regression, with Montenegro's future being shaped by conservative ideas and pro-Serbian and pro-Russian narratives which have been perceived as seeking to shift the country away from its Euro-Atlantic trajectory. On the other hand, it has been interpreted as a positive sign of democratic progress, as for the first time power was transferred peacefully through democratic elections. The latest V-Dem report also emphasizes that Montenegro "began to democratize with the 2020 elections," and that the peaceful transfer of power established electoral democracy (V-Dem Institute, 2026, p. 29). What followed was a technocratic government, then a minority government, and currently a government characterized by economic populism. The instability following the 2020 elections, institutional

crises, and the failure to free independent democratic institutions have, in segments of public opinion, generated the perception of substitution of similar authoritarian-leaning practices. This time, however, authoritarian tendencies have been accompanied with an increase of clerical nationalism, deeper polarization, normalized hate speech, and intermittent attempts to institutionalize conservative pro-Serbian ideas at the systemic level. At the same time, there has been noticeable progress in European integration.

Freedom House classifies Montenegro as a “partly free” country with a score of 69 out of 100 (Freedom House, 2025). Meanwhile, in democracy assessments, the country is described as a “transitional or hybrid regime,” which reflects a decline in its democratic score. In 2023, there was a decline from 3.82 to 3.79, while in 2024 it further declined from 3.79 to 3.75 (Freedom House, 2024).

Montenegro today is in a situation of crisis - a crisis of democracy, an institutional crisis, a crisis of geopolitical orientation, as well as an identity crisis. The crisis in Montenegro resembles precisely what Antonio Gramsci once defined: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Przeworski, 2019, p. 1).

2. Minority Protection in EU Enlargement Criteria: Between the Legal Norms and Political Requirements

In 1993, following the Maastricht Treaty, the European Council in Copenhagen defined for the first time the criteria that aspiring states had to meet in order to become part of this community. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the European idea of extending to the territories that had been under Soviet influence could not be applied without their “political emancipation” that is, their prior democratization, in order to reach the standards of the Western member states of this community.

Divided into three types of criteria, political, economic, and legal, the Copenhagen Criteria implied:

- stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU;
- the ability to take on and implement effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union (European Commission, n.d.).

The political Copenhagen Criteria, including minority rights, were legally based on the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, Article F (F1 and F2). According to the Treaty, “The Union shall respect the national identities of its Member States, whose systems of government are founded on the principles of democracy” (European Union, 1992). In the same article, paragraph 2, the Treaty obliges the Union to respect fundamental rights, as guaranteed by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms signed in Rome on 4 November 1950 (European Union, 1992). Although minorities are not explicitly mentioned, the very emphasis on fundamental rights as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights implies also the protection of minority rights. These rights became subject to the Convention particularly under Article 14 on the prohibition of discrimination, which states: “The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status” (Council of Europe, 1950).

In this way, in the absence of a legal framework within the European Union on minority rights, the Union has indeed always relied on the Council of Europe for issues concerning minorities. Even before the Maastricht Treaty and the formalisation of the minority issue through the Copenhagen Criteria, though not as explicitly as in later enlargements, human and minority rights were an indirect criterion even in earlier enlargements. This was most clearly demonstrated when the tripartite Council–Commission– European Parliament Declaration on Human Rights of 1977 required all EU candidate states to be parties to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p. 9).

Although the issue of minority rights never managed to move beyond a political approach and take its expected place in the normative context, following the definition of the Copenhagen Criteria, the EU in its later legislative framework made efforts to bring minorities within its legal instruments. Even when such efforts materialised, they did so in a rather limited way, as the EU’s approach to minorities remained focused on the individual rights of members of minorities, without moving further towards recognising their group rights. The issue of minority rights, or more precisely, “persons belonging to minorities” is mentioned for the first time in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty (2007). This introduced a novelty in the EU’s legal framework on minority rights by listing them among the fundamental values: “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including

the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail” (European Union, 2012). The recognition of minority rights is further reinforced in Article 49, through which the Union makes membership conditional upon respect for the European values outlined in Article 2: “Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union” (European Union, 2012).

Unlike the EU Treaty, which individualizes minority rights as “the rights of persons belonging to minorities,” the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is the first EU legal document to mention the notion of a “national minority”. In Article 21, the Charter prohibits discrimination, on the grounds of belonging to a national minority, and Article 22 affirms respect for cultural, linguistic and religious diversity (European Union, 2012). Nevertheless, since it derives from the principle of non-discrimination, the Charter primarily concerns individuals with a minority background rather than minorities as collective entities. Similarly, in terms of secondary legislation, the most relevant instrument is the 2000 Racial Equality Directive, which protects the principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination regardless of ethnic or racial origin (European Union, 2000). This too protects individuals who may face discrimination as a result of belonging to a minority, rather than minorities as a group. Addressing minority issues solely through the lens of non-discrimination cannot fully respond to the broader range of needs essential to achieving equality in accordance with the right to cultural survival. As noted in a European Parliament Resolution, “there is a difference between the protection of minorities and anti-discrimination policies; whereas non-discrimination is not enough to stop assimilation; whereas effective equality goes further than refraining from discrimination and means guaranteeing minorities the enjoyment of their rights, such as the right to identity, language use and education, cultural and citizenship rights, etc., on a par with the majority” (European Parliament, 2018).

The European Union succeeded in embedding minority issues within the political criteria, in the articles of the EU Treaty, and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as in certain directives. However, it has never achieved what could be considered one of the fundamental values and principles upon which this community is built: accommodating minority protection through a comprehensive, binding legal instrument dedicated specifically to minorities and elaborating all minority rights in line with international standards. This stems from the inherent complexity of the minority concept within the European context, from the historical connotations the term has

held across different states, and the political philosophies of those states, which have not reached a unified understanding of what constitutes a minority. Consequently, it is often considered a sensitive concept over which European states are unwilling to relinquish sovereignty, preferring to leave such matters to the national level. Thus, within the EU, minority protection has remained more of a political principle than a normative standard.

It is worth noting that, although minority protection is part of the fundamental criteria, as Hughes and Sasse explain, it is the criterion with the least legal support and, consequently, the most difficult to translate into specific negotiating chapters compared to, for example, the economic criteria (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p. 12). Actually, minority rights form part of Chapter 23, “Judiciary and Fundamental Rights,” which requires respect for fundamental rights and EU citizens’ rights “as guaranteed by the *acquis* and by the Fundamental Rights Charter” (European Commission, n.d.). In principle, the process requires the harmonization of national law with the *acquis* through the adoption and alignment of domestic legislation with EU law. However, EU law lacks a specific *acquis* on minorities beyond provisions that mainly address discrimination. Furthermore, as Hughes and Sasse remind us, even when alignment with the *acquis* occurs, it often means formal alignment on paper through the adoption of laws, whereas implementation tends to receive far less attention (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p. 12). Even today, a close examination of the structure of progress reports reveals that they are composed of chapters corresponding to the negotiation chapters, and the level of compliance is primarily assessed based on the legal alignment with the *acquis*. Certainly, the reports contain remarks when legal alignment does not translate into practice, yet much less attention is devoted to the on-the-ground reality—unlike, for example, the Council of Europe’s monitoring reports, which include in-field assessments and visits to municipalities, schools, political representatives, and civil society to examine the situation of minorities. The lack of monitoring mechanisms has also been highlighted in a European Parliament Resolution, which notes that “the EU lacks effective tools to monitor respect for minority rights; calls for effective EU-wide monitoring of the situation of autochthonous and linguistic minorities; considers that the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights should carry out enhanced monitoring of discrimination against national minorities in Member States” (European Parliament, 2018).

Nevertheless, the EU has sought to fill or complement this gap in minority protection through the Council of Europe. In the absence of a legislative basis and institutional mechanism, the EU has relied on the regional minority protection regime established by the OSCE with the Copenhagen Document (1990) and, in particular, the Council of Europe - the only organisation to have

adopted binding hard law instruments on minorities - namely, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992) and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995). Although not explicitly codified, post-1990 enlargement countries demonstrated compliance with the Copenhagen political criterion on minorities by becoming parties to these two treaties and engaging in their implementation. In this way, in the absence of its own monitoring mechanisms for minority rights, the European Union has relied extensively on the findings of the Council of Europe's monitoring bodies, particularly the Advisory Committee of Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

With the definition of the Copenhagen criteria, states would be subjected to detailed annual monitoring, which would indicate the progress and stagnation of candidate states in fulfilling them. Although after the adoption of the Copenhagen criteria the next enlargement took place in 1995 (Austria, Finland, and Sweden), systematic EU monitoring of the negotiation chapters began only in 1997 through the bilateral negotiation process and annual progress reports (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p. 13). The EU's annual progress reports have often been criticized for not giving adequate attention to chapters dealing with minority rights, compared to other parts of the *acquis*. Even when they did, they often prioritized certain minorities while downplaying others. As Hughes and Sasse note, in progress reports on Eastern Bloc states, which had a highly diverse number of minorities, the emphasis was placed only on two groups: Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia, and Roma communities in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Much less attention was paid to Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia or Turks in Bulgaria (Hughes & Sasse, 2003, p. 14). This approach has not changed much even today. The negligence in addressing minority issues in terms of monitoring implementation in relation to harmonization with the *acquis* has often failed to ensure a strong and sustainable foundation for states joining the EU without adequately accommodating their minorities. This has later created conditions for these same states to face backsliding in minority rights, which in recent years has become more pronounced than ever, with rising xenophobia primarily targeting minorities.

The inability to prevent these phenomena is what is known as 'the EU Copenhagen dilemma', which refers to the lack of follow-up on minority issues once states become part of the EU, since with this "the European Commission officially 'loses' competence on the matter of national minorities" (Carrera, Guild, Vosyliute, & Bard, 2017, p. 106). By being decentralized as an internal competence of the EU Member States, over which the Union no longer exercises systematic monitoring, "there is no guarantee that candidate states will stick to the commitments undertaken

under the Copenhagen criteria once they become Member States” (European Parliament, 2018). Recognizing all the challenges that were growing in the field of minority rights, an important moment in minority rights protection was the adoption of the “Minimum Standards for Minorities in the EU” resolution in 2018 by the European Parliament. The resolution also noted that “minority issues have not been high enough on the EU [...]; believes that the EU has a responsibility to protect and promote the rights of minorities; considers it necessary to improve the EU’s legislative framework to protect the rights of persons belonging to minorities in a comprehensive manner” (European Parliament, 2018).

In various circles of political analysis and different European think tanks, the topic of the need to rethink and redefine the Copenhagen criteria for the accession of new countries is often raised. Their relevance today is not the same as in the 1990s when they were defined, and the effect of their application has not always ensured sustainable democracy and protection of minority rights, as can be indicated by the cases of Poland and Hungary. Panchulidze and Youngs emphasize the need for “Copenhagen Plus” criteria, especially after the Russian aggression in Ukraine and current geopolitical trends on the continent. According to them, “The EU needs to update the criteria if it is to develop a democracy support policy that is more balanced, more comprehensive, and more in tune with current geopolitical imperatives” (Panchulidze & Youngs, 2024). The integration process, being one that measures the fulfillment of the Copenhagen Criteria more through formal legal and institutional reforms than through the substantial results that these reforms bring in practice, can more easily undermine the EU democratic values. The need to reform the Copenhagen criteria should especially imply a more inclusive approach to the integration process, in order to strengthen democratic pluralism, including other actors in the process, particularly citizen engagement and civil society, and not only focus on building governmental institutional capacities for adapting to the *acquis* (Panchulidze & Youngs, 2024).

Similarly, Csaky, in an analysis for the Centre for European Reforms, notes that “accession criteria remain too formalistic and focused on institutional reform – a much criticised aspect of the previous two rounds of enlargement – while leaving the people behind” (Csaky, 2024, p. 4). She emphasizes that the accession process should be more participatory, especially including civil society and local democracies, and not only focused on building administrative capacities at the central level, thereby “putting citizens at its centre” (Csaky, 2024, p. 5).

The lack of inclusion in the accession process has often been felt by minorities, who have been frequently excluded from this process. While progress

reports have declared progress on the protection of their rights, minorities have often not experienced tangible affirmative results. Regarding the need for the accession process to be more participatory, a white paper published by ECMI also emphasizes that minorities should be active participants in this process: “National minority inclusion is, therefore, a self-evident part of this process, although it is often overlooked in the top-down nature of accession negotiations. [...] Therefore, it is essential to see engagement with minorities as an empowering process to make minorities stronger as civil society actors. Such an approach can help to create further demand for transparency and inclusion” (Bieber, et al., 2024, p. 9). Furthermore, they note that “Minority issues in many Western Balkan countries are strongly institutionalized around minority community representative bodies, political parties and leadership structures. Relatively little focus is given to more individualized approaches such as complaint mechanisms, litigation or nondiscrimination remedies” (Bieber, et al., 2024).

The fulfillment of the Copenhagen criterion for minority rights continues to be a formal legal act, focused on implementing reforms in the legislative and institutional aspects, while increasingly losing touch with the reality on the ground. This creates space for the influence of external factor that can cause setbacks in democratic values. The EU continues to have the same formal approach to the accession process, remaining blind to the implementation of reforms in practice, which often do not produce the desired and tangible results in society overall.

3. “28 by 28”: Speeding up the Process of Montenegrin EU Accession

How does a long stagnation suddenly turn into rapid progress?

Montenegro has held candidate country status for more than 15 years, since 2010. In 2012, the European Council decided to open the negotiation process with the country. One year later, rule of law chapters 23 and 24 were opened. For almost seven years, this process experienced a void and a slowdown in progress, with no significant movement or achievement recorded. During these years, various chapters were opened but not closed. Today, the country has 33 chapters open, while their closure gained momentum only in recent years, especially after 2022, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. To date, Montenegro has provisionally closed 12 chapters, the majority of which (totally 9 chapters) were concluded between 2024 and 2025 (European Commission, 2025).

Western Balkan countries have been waiting for years for integration. Through progress reports, the European Commission has repeatedly drawn attention to the lack of necessary reforms to fulfill the defined criteria. The most pronounced warnings have focused on democratization, the rule of law, judicial independence, and the fight against corruption and organized crime, specifically chapters 23 and 24. The long waiting period has also reflected the Union's reluctance to open its doors to new members. Internal crises within the Union, especially the challenges posed by the accession of some "democratically unprepared" former Eastern Bloc members, have forced the EU to reconsider the risks that less-consolidated democracies might pose to the Union. Various member states criticized the enlargement process, considering it ineffective in fully consolidating democracy, which contributed to the rise of illiberal democracies that undermined democratic values more broadly within the Union itself (European Parliament, 2025, p. 8). In enlargement countries, the EU might have been always present and actively supported candidate states in implementing democratic reforms. However, the lack of attention to the consequences of reforms that are primarily legislative and not followed by practical effectiveness has often allowed these countries to slip back in progress, drift towards autocracy and right-wing forces, and open the door for other global geopolitical actors to expand their influence. For both parties, the enlargement countries and the European Union, enlargement constitutes primarily a geopolitical priority and, ultimately, a matter of security. Russia's war against Ukraine has reaffirmed the geopolitical significance of enlargement and has, consequently, accelerated the enlargement process, a development frequently underscored in official statements by EU leaders. As noted by Kaja Kallas, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission, at the launch of the 2025 Enlargement Package: "The enlargement process is moving faster today than in the last 15 years. But we cannot afford to lose momentum. The global order is shifting, and Europe's security is increasingly at risk" (European Commission, 2025). Similarly, a year before, the geopolitical context has been emphasized by the President of the European Commission herself, who, in her press statement on the adoption of the 2024 Enlargement Package, stressed: "The tense geopolitical context makes it more compelling than ever that we complete the reunification of our continent, under the same values of democracy and the rule of law. We have already taken great strides over the last years towards integrating new Member States. And enlargement will remain a top priority of the new Commission" (European Commission, 2024).

One of the "great strides" undertaken by the EU to accelerate the integration of Western Balkan candidate countries is the *Growth Plan*, launched in 2023,

which aims not only to foster socio-economic convergence but also to support expected reforms in fundamental areas, including the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights and freedoms, elaborated in detail through the *Reform Agendas* (European Commission, 2025). An important supporting instrument is the *Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA)*. Between 2021–2024, the EU allocated over €135 million in financial and technical assistance to Montenegro under IPA III. Of the total budget, the largest share was for energy support (€30 million), €14 million to support economic growth and public administration reforms to ensure a functional, digital, and accessible administration, and only €7 million for justice reform, fundamental rights, and the fight against organized crime (European Commission, 2025).

The recognition of these risks, particularly geopolitical ones, and the avoidance of repeating past experiences led the European Commission in 2020 to adopt a new accession methodology. In its communication launching the methodology, the Commission stated: “In times of increasing global challenges and divisions, it remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe. [...] Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU’s credibility, for the EU’s success and for the EU’s influence in the region and beyond, especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition” (European Commission, 2020, p. 1).

The “credibility” of the accession process is the main goal of the new methodology. To strengthen this, the European Commission placed *fundamentals* at the heart of the process. The methodology groups negotiation chapters into *clusters*, and the *fundamentals* cluster is crucial and decisive for the process’s trajectory. This cluster includes Chapters 23 and 24, which determine the country’s democracy, human and minority rights, judicial independence, and fight against corruption, as well as freedom, justice, and security. These chapters are opened first and closed last, remaining open throughout the process. Without progress in these chapters, no other chapters can be closed. The methodology’s purpose was to make the negotiation process more effective, transparent, credible, and reliable (European Commission, 2020). This approach, according to which fundamentals are the “entry ticket” to EU membership, reconfirms the EU values. As the Commission explains: “Progress on these will determine the overall pace of negotiations” (European Commission, 2020, pp. 2-3).

Regarding enlargement countries, the Commission notes the region’s “structural weaknesses,” particularly in *fundamentals*, and stresses: “*The process needs to be better equipped to deal with structural weaknesses in the countries, in particular in the area of the fundamentals*” (European Commission, 2020, p. 1). The Commission emphasized that criteria must be “objective, precise, detailed, strict and verifiable”. According to the new

methodology, any progress in reforms should be rewarded tangibly, while stagnation or regression should be sanctioned (European Commission, 2020, p. 5). A European Parliament study notes that focusing on democratic institutions and the rule of law is more necessary today than ever in the history of EU enlargement; thus, enlargement should be conceptualized not only as a geopolitical tool but as a *democratising stabiliser* (European Parliament, 2025, p. 8).

So, where do minorities stand in this new enlargement methodology? Placing fundamentals at the heart of the integration process means also placing minority rights at its core. The fundamentals include rule-of-law chapters, which in turn include minority rights.

In general public discourse in Montenegro, the rule-of-law chapters are recognized as the most challenging. Locally, they are perceived primarily as reforms in justice, judicial independence, and the fight against corruption and organized crime. While fundamental rights are part of these chapters, they are often marginalized in discussions of rule-of-law chapters.

Since 2013, when Montenegro officially opened chapters 23 and 24, which include minority rights, numerous internal benchmarks have been defined. In 2024, Montenegro received a positive assessment for fulfilling interim measures related to the rule of law (IBAR). This led to the adoption of the Interim EU Common Position on these chapters. The position specifies that the chapter can only be closed once three closing benchmarks are met. These include comprehensive justice reform in line with EU acquis and European standards on impartiality, independence, accountability, efficiency, professionalism, access to justice, and quality; robust and effective systems to prevent and counter corruption; and thirdly: “Protects fundamental rights both in law and in practice and is fully prepared to implement the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and other relevant EU acquis upon accession” (European Union, 2024, p. 17). The report clarifies that this benchmark can be considered fulfilled only when: effective implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights is ensured; recommendations of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture are effectively applied; freedom of expression is guaranteed; gender equality and non-discrimination are enforced; strategies for persons with disabilities are implemented; children’s rights and property rights are safeguarded. The protection against discrimination includes minority groups and their cultural rights (European Union, 2024, p. 17).

In the section on minority rights, the 2024 Interim EU Common Position calls on Montenegro to strengthen the protection and promotion of minority rights, implement the Advisory Committee recommendations under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and the

Roma Strategy. Yet, targeted attention to other minorities is largely absent, only the Roma minority is mentioned, highlighting their difficult economic, employment, housing, health, and education conditions (European Union, 2024). Comparing this with the 2013 Interim EU Common Position regarding Chapter 23, including internal benchmarks, there is little difference: warnings and proposals remain largely the same, again highlighting only the Roma situation (European Union, 2013).

The Ministry of European Affairs of Montenegro adopted in April 2025 the *Action Plan for Fulfilling the Final Benchmarks in Negotiation Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights*. Final Benchmark 3 addresses all elements mentioned above by the EU. However, in the section on fundamental rights, under protection against discrimination, aside from the Roma, there are no objectives or activities dedicated to protecting the rights of other minorities or their cultural rights, as required by the EU. The Action Plan includes objectives on gender equality, LGBTQ rights, protection against domestic and sexual violence, support for the Roma and Egyptian communities, combating anti-Roma sentiment, and support for their employment and education, but no reference to other minority cultural rights (Ministarstvo evropskih poslova, Vlada Crne Gore, 2025, pp. 30-36).

The absence of minorities is also noted in the *Reform Agenda 2024–2027*. The Agenda emphasizes increased efforts to protect fundamental rights, particularly for “vulnerable groups” (Ministry of European Affairs, 2024, p. 103). The exclusion or absence of the term “minority,” though implied within the broader concept of “vulnerable groups,” has often left minority issues insufficiently addressed and prevented them from receiving the expected attention in the Reform Agenda. Fundamental rights and the rule of law are defined among the top policy priorities, while fundamental rights and media freedom are defined as a separate sector. Within this framework, three distinct subsectors are foreseen for which reform measures are defined: gender equality, non-discrimination, and the implementation of the recommendations of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment (Ministry of European Affairs, 2024, pp. 109-113). Minorities are not mentioned in any of these subsectors, not even within the non-discrimination subsector, where the new anti-discrimination law is foreseen. The elaboration emphasizes the need to strengthen the protection system against discrimination for vulnerable people, mentions LGBTQ individuals, but minorities are absent.

In progress reports, minority issues are present but limited. The 2025 Progress Report, which has been described by European officials and Montenegrin state representatives as the best progress report Montenegro has

ever had (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2025), notes that Montenegro's legislative and institutional framework for human rights protection is in place, but stresses the need for practical implementation over many years. Findings emphasize that implementation particularly affects "vulnerable groups," including Roma, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ. Key concerns include discrimination, hate speech, and hate crimes. While national minorities are sometimes targets, the report does not explicitly recognize them as such. Key recommendations include implementation of all pending recommendations from the CPT, ECRI and GREVIO, advancing the status of Roma and Egyptians, commitments under the Poznan Declaration, and adoption of new anti-discrimination and personal data protection legislation in line with EU *acquis* (European Commission, 2025, p. 7). In detailed reporting, the EU Progress Report always includes a separate section for minorities and Roma. General conditions for minorities are described briefly, while Roma receive a dedicated section. In a 100-page report, minorities receive only one paragraph of two sentences. The section on minorities evaluates that Montenegro's legislative and strategic framework is in place but not sufficiently effective. According to the report the persons belonging to minorities are well integrated into the Montenegrin society, and recommends a wide ranging strategy to further foster a shared civic identity (European Commission, 2025, p. 49). In the separate Roma section, significant concerns remain regarding political representation, discrimination, education, early marriages, social services, housing, and low skill levels, with informal employment remaining largely unformalized (European Commission, 2025, p. 49).

It is worth noting that, the reduction of minority issues to the socio-economic situation of the Roma community is not only a practice of external monitoring mechanisms, but such an approach is also reflected at the domestic level, namely in the practice of national institutions. A similar approach to addressing minority issues, by centering the discussion almost exclusively on the Roma minority, is also often evident in the work of the Ombudsman of Montenegro. In the latest annual report, within the chapter on discrimination based on national or ethnic affiliation, it can be observed that the entire chapter is devoted to discrimination against the Roma minority. The main recommendations primarily point to the need to improve their socio-economic situation and to ensure authentic representation through affirmative action in the Parliament of Montenegro. Nevertheless, the Ombudsman also emphasizes the need for proportional representation of all minorities within state institutions (Zaštitnik ljudskih prava i sloboda, 2025, p. 242).

4. Minority Struggles and the Montenegrin “(Un)United in Diversity” Approach towards EU

In May 2024, the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities finalized the fourth monitoring cycle. The State Report itself begins by stating that “Montenegro, which is characterized as multi-ethnic and multiconfessional, has recently been marked with deep social polarization, increasing hate speech and intolerance, and additional efforts need to be focused on strengthening intercultural relations and social cohesion” (The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights of Montenegro, 2022, p. 6). Similarly, observations by civil society organizations in the country indicate a decline in the perception of society as multicultural. According to a survey conducted by the Center for Civic Education, while in 2023, 81.7% of the population perceived society as multicultural, this figure decreased to 76.8% in 2024. At the same time, the proportion of respondents who do not perceive Montenegro as a multicultural society increased from 18.3% to 23.2% (Centar za građansko obrazovanje, 2024).

The year 2020, marked by the change of government but also the preceding events, such as the adoption of the Law on Religious Freedoms, represents a turning point in Montenegro in many respects. In the context of minority rights, certain areas have remained stable, such as the legislative and policy framework, where minority rights in the legal sense have remained intact. However, the resulting environment has become harsher, more exclusionary, and more polarized in terms of their realization. As noted earlier, recently, Montenegro has been shaped by an environment in which the main roles have been played by the Serbian Orthodox Church and the geopolitical influence of foreign and neighboring states, which, according to the Advisory Committee, “have acted as destabilizing forces” (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2024, p. 4). Society has become more deeply polarized along ethnic and religious lines, which in the past were often considered “relatively harmonious” (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2024, p. 4). The most recent monitoring cycle of the Advisory Committee, compared to the previous ones, found the country in a deteriorated intercultural dialogue, with ethno-religious tensions that have challenged the constitutional civic character that the country claims to uphold. Although in the official rhetoric the authorities’ commitment to strengthening interculturalism is strong, the Committee notes that “this is not reflected at the societal level or implemented in practice” (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National

Minorities, 2024, p. 22). The change of government, together with the overall polarizing and tense climate of recent years, has raised doubts on the country's civic model, its proclaimed ideals of multiculturalism and multiconfessionalism, and the sustainability of these foundations that the country claimed to possess – showing how a mere change of government can easily challenge them.

The main factor contributing to an increasingly tenser interethnic atmosphere has been the intensification of hate speech. In May 2025, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Montenegro and, after commending the country's progress since independence in securing a solid legislative framework complemented by a range of strategies and institutions for the protection of human rights, stated: "I am therefore concerned by hate speech and divisive narratives – on TV, on the internet, at sports events, and even in schools. Some politicians also resort to divisive rhetoric, and sometimes outright hate speech, for perceived political advantage" (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, 2025).

In the context of minority rights, hate speech has emerged as one of the most pressing issues in Montenegro, being increasingly widespread and less regulated across various segments of public life. In public discourse, the issue of "identity" has become one the dominant themes in public debate. Identity has come to be viewed increasingly as a divisive instrument in a society as diverse as Montenegro, rather than as a means of fostering cohesion and social inclusion. Belonging to a national, ethnic, religious, or sexual identity has frequently constituted sufficient grounds for individuals to become targets of hate speech. Hate speech directed against national minorities has often manifested itself through the glorification of war crimes, denial of the Srebrenica genocide, and historical revisionism, frequently materialized in the erection of monuments to war criminals or the naming of public spaces after them. Such practices have often been encouraged, and at times even carried out, by state officials themselves. During his recent visit, the High Commissioner also emphasized the responsibility borne by politicians and public figures in this regard, noting that their conduct must be "consistent with international human rights standards and guided by a spirit of unity and equality for all" (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, 2025).

Hate speech was also a central topic in the reporting process under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In its concluding observations, the Human Rights Committee noted that, although Montenegro possesses a legislative and policy framework addressing this issue, hate speech does not receive an adequate punitive response. As the Committee

further observed, there is a general lack of public awareness regarding the mechanisms available to combat hate speech, and even when cases are initiated, the penalties imposed do not serve as an effective deterrent to the continuation of this phenomenon. The insufficient investigation and prosecution of perpetrators, the absence of sanctions, monitoring, and public condemnation of historical revisionism, as well as the lack of training for law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and judges on identifying and prosecuting hate speech and historical revisionism, especially online, has led to hate speech in the country escalating to such levels (Human Rights Committee, 2025, p. 4). According to research conducted by the civil sector, hate speech is assessed to be at very high levels, present across broad segments of social and media space, most frequently targeting individuals on racial, national, and ethnic grounds, as well as based on religious affiliation and sexual orientation. Citizens perceive it as most prevalent in the narratives of politicians and on social networks, but also in television programming, sports events, and everyday discourse (Bešić, 2022, pp. 50-52). Similarly, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report identifies target groups such as ethnic or ethno-religious minorities, women, and expresses concern about negative attitudes toward Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, as well as persons with disabilities (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024).

Montenegro does not have a specific law defining and sanctioning hate speech. Nevertheless, several legal provisions aim to combat it through the Criminal Code and the Law on Media, both of which prohibit incitement to violence, discrimination, and hatred on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, or nationality. The Law on Protection from Discrimination also encompasses hate speech and discriminatory acts, providing minorities with additional protection. From a strategic standpoint, the prevention of hate speech forms part of the Media Strategy 2023–2027 and the Strategy for Minority Policy 2024–2028.

However, the fact that hate speech and hate crime cases often go unpunished is perhaps best illustrated by incidents in which such rhetoric originates from state or public officials themselves, such as the case of the mayor of Nikšić, who publicly denied the Srebrenica Genocide. The Higher Court in Podgorica ruled that this statement “did not incite national and religious hatred” (Vijesti, 2023). Ethno-religious tensions and historical revisionism have also been reflected in the alteration of public holidays, the erection of monuments, and the naming of public spaces intended to rehabilitate war criminals. For example, in Pljevlja, the municipality changed its day of celebration from the date marking the city’s liberation in World War II to Good Friday on the Orthodox calendar (Advisory Committee on

the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2024, p. 21). Likewise, the local government in Pljevlja renamed several streets after the “fallen fighters of the 1990s,” individuals who had participated in 90’s acts of aggression across the territories of the former Yugoslavia (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024). Graffiti glorifying war criminals such as Ratko Mladić and monuments erected to “Chetnik” commanders responsible for atrocities during World War II, such as Pavle Đurišić, have deeply offended the collective sentiments of national minorities in the country, particularly Bosniaks, Albanians, and Croats, but also ethnic Montenegrins.

The rehabilitation of war crimes and the persistence of hate speech stem from different root causes, one of which lies also in the education system, which remains insufficiently inclusive. School curricula frequently fail to provide adequate instruction or encourage critical reflection on various historical periods and contexts. Numerous civil society actors have repeatedly called for civic education to become a mandatory part of the school curriculum, as this would promote universal and European values, respect for human and minority rights, and foster intercultural dialogue and trust-building among different ethnic communities.

With the change of government in 2023, which adopted a pro-European rhetoric, some observers expected that tensions and the prevailing atmosphere would ease. However, as such tensions persist and incidents of hate speech and interethnic friction continue, the official governmental discourse has not accorded them the necessary attention, keeping these issues largely in the shadows while prioritizing matters of economic development and European integration. Although minority issues constitute a fundamental aspect of the accession process, government representatives have often reduced this chapter to judicial reform, the independence of the judiciary, the functionality of the Constitutional Court, and the fight against corruption. The risks and consequences posed by ongoing hate speech for minority rights, the adoption of the proclaimed European values, and overall social cohesion have not received adequate consideration. The marginalization of this phenomenon and the absence of a coherent structural response from the authorities have normalized it, granting it increasing space in public speeches, the media, television, and online platforms, as well as at sports events, where chants calling for the killing of Albanians or the repetition of Srebrenica can still be heard. Even at cultural events, such as a recent film festival, a screening was interrupted simply because the film was in the Albanian language.

Pro-European rhetoric and the overall public discourse surrounding the recent rapid progress on the path toward European integration have often resulted in hate speech being overlooked and passing without significant public attention. For example, on 16 December 2025, on the very day the

government was celebrating the historic success of closing five negotiation chapters, the Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina was vandalized with graffiti reading “*Thank you, General, for Srebrenica*”. The euphoria surrounding this achievement in the European integration process led to this instance of hate speech passing without strong or explicit reactions from state leadership (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2025).

The diversion of attention from such challenges within Montenegrin society has not led to their mitigation or elimination. As research by CEDEM demonstrates, the overall level of nationalism in 2025 stands at 57.3%, with extreme nationalism at 16.5%. According to the study, these figures are nearly identical to those recorded in 2023 (Bešić, 2025, p. 30). The research also indicates a slight decline in the overall level of ethnic distance in recent years, though no significant reduction has occurred in any specific category (Bešić, 2025, p. 44). Similarly, there is a modest downward trend in ethnic distance, which nonetheless remains visibly present, which is higher among Serbs (29.3%) than among Montenegrins (16.6%) (Bešić, 2025, p. 48). The perception of discrimination based on ethnic or national grounds remains high, according to the research conducted by the Center for Civic Education, with 59.7% of respondents believing that such discrimination exists (Centar za građansko obrazovanje, 2024). Meanwhile, perceptions regarding discrimination against minorities are divided: half of the respondents believe that minorities are subject to discrimination, while the other half has the opposite opinion (Centar za građansko obrazovanje, 2024).

It is also noteworthy to consider minorities’ perception of their position and the extent to which their rights are effectively realized. Political participation is largely understood as participation in government. According to research findings, the realization of minority participation is conceived primarily in terms of inclusion in governmental structures rather than through sustainable institutional protection. As Bešić notes, the fact that minority rights in Montenegro are not perceived as guaranteed by independent institutions but rather as dependent on political dynamics indicates that the country has not yet managed to establish adequate institutional safeguards for minorities, protections that would function independently of their representation in the executive branch. This reflects shortcomings in the rule of law and the limited tangible impact of the European integration process on the everyday lives of minorities (Bešić, 2025, p. 59). Such perceptions, combined with the absence of independent and sustainable institutional mechanisms, are the result of a deeply entrenched political and partisan monopoly over minority representation. The voice of minorities is expressed almost exclusively through political parties and the National Councils, bodies often perceived as politicized themselves, while only marginally through

independent institutions. Representation of minorities within civil society remains limited, and even where it exists, it lacks sufficient structural access or genuine dialogue with political and decision-making authorities.

Conclusion

This article highlights the paradox of European integration between its value-based, principled, and normative dimension and its strategic geopolitical dimension. By examining a conditionality process that stands between merit-based progress and geopolitical priorities, the article argues that the issue of minority rights within the European integration process remains insufficiently addressed. Although minority rights constitute one of the key Copenhagen criteria and are partially translated into negotiation chapters 23 and 24, which form part of the fundamentals, they often remain overshadowed by the geopolitical priorities of the EU and the enlargement states.

The crises facing the European Union have contributed to minority rights being frequently treated as a secondary issue, with the focus placed primarily on the technical and procedural aspects of aligning national legislation with the *acquis*. At the same time, realities on the ground convey messages of democratic and multicultural regression. To ensure long-term democratic stability in a multicultural spirit, there is a clear need to re-center minority protection within the Copenhagen political criteria, and EU support for reforms must focus more consistently on all aspects of the fundamentals, including human and minority rights.

The place that minorities do or do not occupy in the integration process cannot be determined solely by the political participation of minority representatives in government. Being a substantive part of the integration process requires a more inclusive bottom-up approach involving all actors, and a more pluralistic engagement that goes beyond political elites, in order to ensure that minority voices are heard throughout the integration process. In Montenegro, although the legislative and policy framework for minority rights remains in place, the social and political environment has become harsher and more polarized. Since 2020, hate speech and historical revisionism have intensified, and despite an adequate legal framework, institutional responses remain weak. The normalization of such rhetoric continues to threaten interethnic relations. These phenomena must be systematically addressed within the EU accession monitoring process, and monitoring tools for minority protection within the EU need to be strengthened to enable a more comprehensive and evidence-based assessment.

The article also contributes to raising awareness of the need to demystify the European Union as a “safe haven” for national minorities, a perception that is particularly widespread among minority communities in Montenegro. Once a country becomes an EU member state, the European Commission loses its competences in the field of minority rights, and member states are no longer subject to annual assessments of compliance with the political criteria. For this reason, the conditionality phase of the negotiation process represents a crucial opportunity to address minority issues before accession. Otherwise, there is a risk that the situation will remain unchanged or even deteriorate, as has occurred in some EU member states.

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