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First Accession Conference with Montenegro

Negotiations with Montenegro on its accession to the European Union were opened today at the first meeting of the Accession Conference at ministerial level.

This follows a decision by the General Affairs Council on 26 June to open the talks, as endorsed by the European Council earlier today.

The EU delegation was headed by Nicolai Wammen, Minister for European Affairs of Denmark, and the European Commission was represented by Štefan Füle, Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy. The Montenegrin delegation was led by Milan Roćen, Minister for Foreign Affairs and European Integration.

Montenegro is already a close partner of the EU in the Stabilisation and Association Process for the Western Balkans and, as stated by the Council on 26 June, the EU delegation noted that Montenegro has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with EU membership criteria, and in particular the political criteria, to start accession negotiations.

In addition, the EU presented its Negotiating Framework, also agreed by the Council on 26 June. The Negotiating Framework takes account of the experience of the EU's fifth enlargement and the evolving *acquis*, and duly reflects Montenegro's own merits and specific characteristics. It sets out the principles governing the negotiations and the new approach agreed on for accession talks as regards the chapters on judiciary and fundamental rights and on justice, freedom and security, as well as negotiating procedures.

P R E S S

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The EU delegation also underlined that on the path towards accession, Montenegro will need to continue its efforts to align its legislation with the EU's *acquis* and to ensure its implementation and enforcement.

The EU emphasised the particular importance it attaches to the rule of law and fundamental rights, and urged Montenegro to tackle the issues of concern identified by the Commission in its latest progress report. These include especially the independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the need for Montenegro to step up its efforts in order to establish a solid track record in the course of the negotiations. Europol will present a report on organised crime in Montenegro, and the Commission will ensure that this is taken into account in its screening reports.

Contacts with Montenegro will be now pursued in order to set a date and the agenda for the first meeting of the Accession Conference at deputies level.
