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› Italy and Montenegro: Bilateral Cooperation and Montenegro's EU Accession*

- › Italy is Montenegro's closest major EU partner and one of the most consistent supporters of Western Balkans enlargement, but bilateral engagement remains fragmented across diplomatic, security, economic and accession-related instruments.
- › As Montenegro enters the final phase of its EU accession process, coordinated Italian support has become increasingly important during a narrowing political window for enlargement.
- › The twentieth anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2026 offers an opportunity to transform long-standing political goodwill into a more structured Italy-Montenegro accession partnership.



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Italy is Montenegro's closest major EU neighbour. The relationship, rooted in Adriatic proximity, historical ties and sustained diplomatic engagement, increasingly centres on European integration, regional stability, energy connectivity and security cooperation. As Montenegro moves closer to EU membership than any Western Balkan country since Croatia's accession in 2013 and as 2026 marks twenty years of diplomatic relations following Montenegro's independence, bilateral relations are entering a more consequential phase.¹

Historical links remain important: relations between the two countries date to the nineteenth century, following Montenegro's international recognition after the Congress of Berlin in 1878, and deepened through dynastic and cultural ties, including the marriage of Princess Jelena Petrović Njegoš to the future King Vittorio Emanuele III of Italy.² Contemporary relations are defined less by symbolism than by shared strategic interests across the Adriatic. For Italy, a stable, secure and EU-integrated Montenegro serves both the wider enlargement agenda and national interests linked to regional stability, energy connectivity and the Adriatic-Ionian region.

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¹ European Commission DG for Enlargement, *Commission Presents Financial Package for Montenegro's EU Accession*, 30 June 2026, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/5742_en.

² Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Historical Diplomatic Archives*.



»» *Italian support has often been more visible as regional enlargement advocacy than as targeted support for Montenegro's specific accession priorities*

In Montenegro, the 2020 parliamentary elections marked the country's first democratic transfer of power in nearly three decades, ending the rule of Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists. After a prolonged period of political instability from 2020 to 2023, Montenegro's accession process regained momentum under Prime Minister Milojko Spajić's government, formed in October 2023, which placed EU integration at the centre of its programme. EU membership has remained the central foreign policy objective since regaining independence in 2006, with the parallel objective of joining NATO, achieved in 2017.³ The renewed momentum behind EU enlargement following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has provided a more favourable context for advancing this objective. This momentum was reinforced by Montenegro's positive 2024 Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) on rule-of-law reforms under the EU's revised enlargement methodology, which removed a major obstacle to further progress in the accession process.

Despite extensive Italian support for Montenegro's accession and substantial bilateral engagement, Italy's approach has remained fragmented across policy domains and only partially aligned with Montenegro's specific accession priorities. As Montenegro enters the final phase of accession negotiations, Italy faces a growing need to complement its traditional role as a regional advocate of enlargement with a more structured and accession-oriented bilateral partnership.

Diplomatic relations and political dialogue

Italy occupies a distinctive place in Montenegro's European trajectory, combining geographical proximity with sustained political support for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Italian support for Montenegro's accession reflects both strategic interests and long-standing political positioning: enlargement has traditionally been viewed as a stabilising instrument in a region closely linked to Italian security, economic and geopolitical interests. Rome backed Montenegro's EU Stabilisation and Association Process from its early stages, supported the Stabilisation and Association Agreement signed in 2007 and in force since 2010, and has repeatedly described Montenegro as the most advanced candidate in the current enlargement process. Despite this strategic convergence, Italian support has often been more visible as regional enlargement advocacy than as targeted support for Montenegro's specific accession priorities.

Despite ideological differences between successive centre-left and centre-right governments, Italy has preserved a broadly stable position in favour of Western Balkans enlargement, reflecting a degree of cross-partisan foreign policy continuity. This commitment has been reflected in sustained diplomatic engagement, regular high-level political contacts and repeated public affirmations of support for Montenegro's EU integration, exemplified by President Sergio Mattarella's official visits to Montenegro in 2015 and again in 2025.

Political dialogue intensified after 2022, coinciding with renewed EU attention

³ NATO, *Relations with Montenegro (Archived)*, updated 14 December 2017, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-montenegro-archived>.



» Increased political contact has not consistently translated into publicly visible coordination on accession-specific questions

to enlargement following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the formation of the Meloni government. Between 2015 and May 2026, sixteen high-level bilateral visits involving presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers took place, with six occurring after 2023, suggesting increased political engagement. In this context, the meeting between Prime Ministers Milojko Spajić and Giorgia Meloni in April 2025 reinforced enlargement as recurring theme of bilateral dialogue.⁴

Increased political contact has not consistently translated into publicly visible coordination on accession-specific questions. Political dialogue remained largely declaratory rather than chapter-specific.⁵ In addition, Prime Minister Meloni's planned participation in the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Tivat in June 2026 did not materialise, a notable absence given the high-level attendance of several European leaders. The summit was particularly significant because it showcased the emergence of a broader pro-enlargement consensus within the EU, including among traditionally cautious member states such as France and Germany. Statements by President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Friedrich Merz underscored growing support for Montenegro's accession as part of the Union's wider geopolitical strategy.⁶

The pattern of political engagement also reveals a degree of structural asymmetry. Most high-level visits involved Montenegrin officials travelling to Italy, reflecting both Italy's greater political weight within the EU and Montenegro's incentive to cultivate bilateral support during accession negotiations. Such asymmetry is characteristic of enlargement politics, where candidate states routinely invest diplomatic capital in relationships with influential member states. This dynamic points to the importance of proactive Montenegrin diplomacy during accession.

Italian support has also carried a normative dimension. While "enlargement" (*allargamento*) remains the standard language of EU policy, Italian political discourse frequently refers to the "reunification" (*riunificazione*) of the Western Balkans with Europe, emphasising historical and geographic continuity between the region and the European project.⁷ This framing illustrates the consistency with which Italian political elites have framed enlargement as both strategically legitimate and historically grounded while also seeking to promote a positive political narrative around the process.

Yet this narrative stands in some contrast to public opinion, which remains divided and poorly informed about EU enlargement. Recent survey data indicate that only 45 per cent of Italians are in favour of EU membership of Montenegro, while only a small minority of them feel well informed about the issue (3 per cent).⁸ This suggests that Italy's enduring commitment to enlargement has

⁴ "Meloni Meets Spajić: Strong Support for Montenegro's EU Accession Path", in *Sarajevo Times*, 16 April 2025, <https://wp.me/pgrPjy-18Mh>.

⁵ Montenegro Government, *Spajić, Meloni: Strengthening Cooperation with Global Actors beyond Europe is Important*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.gov.me/en/article/spajic-meloni-strengthening-cooperation-with-global-actors-beyond-europe-is-important>.

⁶ "EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tivat: As It Happened", in *European Western Balkans*, 5 June 2026, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/?p=57943>.

⁷ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Italy Convenes Western Balkans Countries. Tajani: "In the EU to Strengthen All of Europe"*, 24 September 2025, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=148201>.

⁸ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 564: Attitudes towards EU Enlargement*, February-March 2025, September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.2876/7455185>.



» Italy's engagement with Montenegro has long been shaped by its broader approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans

been driven primarily by elite consensus rather than by strong societal demand.

Italy, EU enlargement and regional cooperation

Italy's engagement with Montenegro has long been shaped by its broader approach to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Since the launch of the EU's Regional Approach in 1997 and the subsequent Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in 1999, regional cooperation has been regarded as a core component of the Union's stabilisation and integration strategy for the Western Balkans.⁹ Italy actively supported this approach and gradually established itself as one of its principal advocates, promoting regional frameworks designed to foster political dialogue, economic integration and institutional convergence with the EU.

This commitment was reflected in Italy's support for a range of regional initiatives. The Central European Initiative (CEI), established in 1989 and headquartered in Trieste, and the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII), launched in 2000 and later incorporated into EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) in 2014, reinforced Italy's role as an institutional bridge between the EU and South-Eastern Europe. Rather than targeting one country alone, these frameworks reflected Italy's view that regional cooperation should complement the EU's merit-based accession process, helping to consolidate post-conflict stabilisation while preventing new political and developmental divides across the Western Balkans.

Italy further supported regional governance through the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA), while playing an active role in the Berlin Process after 2014. Under the Italian chairmanship of the Berlin Process, the 2017 Trieste Summit advanced the Regional Economic Area and the Transport Community Treaty, both intended to strengthen regional integration and alignment with EU standards. During a period of enlargement fatigue, these initiatives helped maintain momentum behind enlargement by promoting regional cooperation, gradual integration and convergence with EU standards.

More recently, Italy has sought to sustain political momentum behind enlargement through the Friends of the Western Balkans initiative¹⁰ and through proposals aimed at accelerating the accession process. In February 2025, Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani advanced an Italian proposal for the gradual integration of candidate countries into EU policies and programmes prior to full membership.¹¹ The same logic informed Italy's support for the May

⁹ Bonomi, Matteo, "EU Enlargement as a Form of Milieu Governance in the Western Balkans", in Sonia Lucarelli and James Sperling (eds), *Handbook of European Union Governance*, Cheltenham/Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2025, p. 445-458.

¹⁰ An informal coalition of Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Italy, Slovakia and Slovenia, established through the Göttweig Declaration in 2023 to coordinate political support for Western Balkans enlargement. See Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, *Friends of the Western Balkans Call for Concrete Steps towards the Integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union*, June 2023, <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/the-ministry/press/news/2023/06/friends-of-the-western-balkans-call-for-concrete-steps-towards-the-integration-of-the-western-balkans-into-the-european-union>.

¹¹ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Italian Proposal to Step Up Candidate Countries' Accession to the EU*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=131479>.



>> Montenegro's recent progress towards membership is likely to place greater emphasis on country-specific accession dynamics

2026 non-paper on the gradual integration of the Western Balkans into the EU Single Market, which envisaged phased and merit-based access to selected benefits of integration before accession.¹²

Together, these initiatives reflect Italy's longstanding preference for promoting enlargement through regional cooperation and gradual integration. At the same time, Montenegro's recent progress towards membership is likely to place greater emphasis on country-specific accession dynamics. As Podgorica moves closer to concluding negotiations and preparing its Accession Treaty, Italy may increasingly need to complement its traditional role as a regional advocate of enlargement with more focused support for the accession of the EU's most advanced candidate country.

Montenegro's accession and priorities for bilateral cooperation

Following the adoption of the EU's revised enlargement methodology by the European Commission in 2020, Montenegro became the first candidate country to receive a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) on Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) in 2024, thereby removing a key obstacle to the provisional closure of additional negotiating chapters under the revised methodology. By June 2026, Montenegro had opened all 33 negotiating chapters covering the EU acquis and provisionally closed sixteen, including eleven after the positive IBAR assessment. The Montenegrin government has set the ambitious goal of closing all the chapters by the end of 2026. The establishment of a working group for Montenegro's Accession Treaty in April 2026 further reinforced the perception that accession had entered its final and most consequential phase, even as Montenegro continued to face challenges in the rule of law, judicial independence and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Security cooperation and rule of law

In that context, security cooperation represents one of the most developed dimensions of Italy-Montenegro relations, shaped by both Montenegro's NATO membership and the requirements of the EU accession process. Italy has supported reforms in judicial cooperation, border management, policing, and the fight against organised crime and corruption, particularly in Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), widely regarded as the core rule-of-law chapters of accession. Bilateral engagement reflects converging interests: for Montenegro, alignment with EU standards, and for Italy, stability across the Adriatic and Western Balkans.

The institutional depth of cooperation is evident in the bilateral treaty framework. Twenty-three agreements relate to areas directly relevant to Chapters 23 and 24, including extradition, judicial cooperation, migration, border management, anti-trafficking and defence. Engagement has also accelerated in recent years: of the five bilateral agreements signed between 2023 and 2026, four concern

¹² CeSPI, "News: Enlargement: The Non-Paper on the Gradual Integration of the Western Balkans into the EU Single Market", in *Balkan Focus*, 23 May 2026, <https://www.cespi.it/en/node/3527>.



»» **Security cooperation represents one of the most developed dimensions of Italy-Montenegro relations**

defence cooperation, culminating in the Defence Cooperation Agreement signed in Podgorica in March 2026.¹³

Building on this treaty framework, operational cooperation has also deepened through initiatives such as EU4LEM, led by Italy and implemented with the Slovenian Ministry of the Interior since September 2025, supports Montenegro's alignment with EU standards in policing, law enforcement and judicial cooperation.¹⁴ Beyond technical assistance, Italian and Montenegrin police, customs, prosecutorial and intelligence institutions participate in joint investigations and operational task forces coordinated through Europol, targeting criminal networks operating across the Western Balkans and Adriatic region. Cooperation spans intelligence sharing, financial investigations, border security, anti-mafia operations and broader justice and home affairs coordination, illustrating the operational depth of bilateral engagement.

Longstanding cooperation through the Guardia di Finanza, Italy's financial law enforcement agency, further demonstrates the practical depth of bilateral engagement. Italian institutions have supported training in financial investigations, anti-smuggling efforts and cross-border asset recovery, including in cooperation with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Montenegro.¹⁵ The latter's long-discussed but unrealised proposal to establish a specialised financial police structure presents a potentially important opportunity for deeper bilateral cooperation, particularly given the relevance of the Italian model to Chapter 23 priorities concerning corruption and financial crime. If developed with Italian institutional support, such a unit could strengthen Montenegro's reform credibility and offer lessons for comparable reforms elsewhere among candidate countries.

Italy has also contributed to Montenegro's accession-related reforms through instruments such as IPA, TAIEX, Twinning and Interreg. These mechanisms follow EU-wide programming logics rather than priorities tailored by Rome to Montenegro's specific needs, limiting their visibility as distinctly Italian forms of support.

Civil society support

Italy's engagement with Montenegro also extends to support for civil society, which plays a complementary role in monitoring the same reform processes. Montenegro's civil society has developed significant capacity, with organisations active in rule-of-law monitoring, anti-corruption advocacy, media freedom, minority rights and environmental governance. This capacity has depended heavily on external donor support, primarily through EU pre-accession instruments and a smaller number of bilateral donors.

Italy also supports civil society in the Western Balkans through several funding channels, although these are predominantly regional rather than country-specific. Its most direct grant instrument is the *Bando Balcani* programme,

¹³ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Visita ufficiale del Ministro Crosetto in Serbia e Montenegro*, 3 March 2026, <https://www.difesa.it/primopiano/visita-ufficiale-del-ministro-crosetto-in-serbia-e-montenegro/90951.html>.

¹⁴ See the EU4LEM project website: <https://www.eu4lem.me>.

¹⁵ OSCE, *Fighting Organized and Economic Crime through Asset Recovery Focus of OSCE Training Course in Montenegro*, 27 March 2024, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/565405>.



>> As Montenegro moves closer to accession, concerns about the sustainability of civil society financing become increasingly pressing

managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered through Italian embassies, which provides grants of up to 30,000 euros covering up to 90 per cent of project costs. However, the programme applies identical thematic priorities across all six Western Balkan countries, including democracy, reconciliation, EU integration, rule of law and human rights, leaving limited room to tailor support to Montenegro's specific political context and accession-related vulnerabilities.

Beyond *Bando Balcani*, Italy supports Montenegro through the CEI Fund at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which has financed ninety-two projects with an approximate total grant value of 9 million euros. Additional support comes indirectly through the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), whose regional office in Tirana participates in programmes covering Montenegro, including regional cultural and governance initiatives. While these mechanisms demonstrate sustained engagement, they also reinforce the broader pattern of regionalised rather than Montenegro-specific support.

As Montenegro moves closer to accession, concerns about the sustainability of civil society financing become increasingly pressing. Membership would end eligibility for pre-accession funding instruments, and although accession opens alternative EU funding streams, these may not fully compensate for the loss of targeted support, particularly for smaller organisations. The transition to post-accession financing could therefore weaken reform-oriented capacities developed during accession and reduce the number of independent actors able to monitor whether reforms are sustained in practice.

Looking ahead, increased Italian support for Montenegrin civil society during the accession phase could strengthen bottom-up reform monitoring while also increasing the visibility of Italian engagement in Montenegro.

Economic relations and energy

While security cooperation and civil society support illustrate the political and institutional depth of the relationship, economic ties reveal both the strengths and limits of bilateral interdependence.

Italy remained among Montenegro's leading trading partners in 2025. According to preliminary trade data and infoMercatiEsteri estimate, Italian exports to Montenegro totalled approximately 397 million euros,¹⁶ reinforcing Italy's position as a major supplier of industrial goods, machinery and manufactured products. Montenegro's small market, industrial base and population size constrain the development of manufacturing and supply-chain linkages comparable to those seen in larger regional economies.

Institutional mechanisms intended to broaden economic cooperation have produced mixed results. The Montenegro-Italy Economic Dialogue roundtable held in Podgorica in 2025¹⁷ signalled political interest in expanding cooperation in infrastructure, renewable energy, tourism and agriculture. Yet the

¹⁶ InfoMercatiEsteri, *Montenegro*, updated 22 June 2026, https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-sintesi/montenegro_79.pdf.

¹⁷ "Event on 'Italy-Montenegro Economic Dialogue' in Podgorica", in *Ansa*, 4 April 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/news_from_embassies/2025/04/04/event-on-italy-montenegro-economic-dialogue-in-podgorica_63fcd4a9-5432-440f-be02-9f49d3b81533.html.



»» *As accession approaches, the focus should shift toward strategic forms of cooperation beyond the interconnector*

postponement of the planned bilateral Business Forum, originally announced for summer 2025, illustrates a recurring pattern: political ambition does not automatically translate into sustained institutional follow-through. A single delayed event should not be overstated, but it reflects a broader gap visible elsewhere in the relationship between bilateral ambition and implementation capacity.

The energy dimension illustrates what sustained bilateral coordination can produce. The clearest example is the submarine electricity interconnector linking Lastva Grbaljska and Pescara, inaugurated in 2019 through cooperation between CGES and Terna. Enabling 600 megawatt of electricity exchange, the project positioned Montenegro as an emerging regional energy transit point even before EU membership and gained additional strategic relevance following the energy disruptions triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Further integration is planned through the memorandum of understanding on electricity market coupling signed in October 2025, which foresees a second cable and expanded transmission capacity. The proposed interconnector would enable bidirectional electricity exchange of up to 1,200 megawatt, doubling current capacity, with the 500-million-euro project expected to begin in 2027.¹⁸

Given Montenegro's market size and structural constraints, bilateral economic cooperation should prioritise targeted sectors capable of delivering realistic and mutually beneficial outcomes. As accession approaches, the focus should shift toward strategic forms of cooperation beyond the interconnector, including renewable energy, infrastructure, regulatory alignment and specialised investment partnerships.

Looking ahead

Italy-Montenegro relations rest on strong foundations. Diplomatic engagement has expanded, security cooperation has deepened, and Italy's commitment to Western Balkans enlargement has remained broadly stable across successive governments. That consistency, particularly when compared with the more variable positions of some EU member states, remains a strategic asset for Montenegro as it enters the final phase of accession negotiations.

Yet the relationship also contains a structural tension that is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Italian engagement has been sustained but fragmented: support for Montenegro's European trajectory has been channelled through parallel policy tracks, security cooperation, civil society programmes, energy connectivity and regional initiatives, without consistent coordination around Montenegro's specific accession priorities. As a result, Italy's considerable political and institutional capital has not always translated into visible accession-related impact.

This gap matters more now because the stakes on both sides have grown. For Montenegro, a reliable partner capable of engaging with the substantive

¹⁸ "Montenegro, Italy Sign Memorandum on Electricity Market Coupling", in *Balkan Green Energy News*, 24 October 2025, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/?p=86526>.



content of accession negotiations carries increasing value as the process enters its most technically demanding phase. For Italy, Montenegro's accession represents the most advanced and visible test of its long-standing commitment to stability, integration and enlargement in the Western Balkans. A successful outcome would reinforce Italy's credibility as a leading advocate of enlargement and demonstrate the continued relevance of its engagement in the region.

Italy's interest therefore extends beyond general support for enlargement to the quality and sustainability of Montenegro's reforms. This is particularly evident in areas where Italian expertise is directly relevant, including financial investigations, anti-corruption enforcement, border management and the fight against organised crime. Supporting Montenegro's efforts to strengthen its institutional capacity in these domains, including through cooperation inspired by the experience of the Guardia di Finanza – would not only contribute to progress under Chapters 23 and 24 but also demonstrate how Italian expertise can be translated into tangible accession outcomes.

At the same time, more targeted support for Montenegrin civil society organisations engaged in reform monitoring could help sustain independent scrutiny during the final phase of accession and beyond membership. As Montenegro transitions from pre-accession instruments to post-accession funding arrangements, some organisations may face growing financial uncertainty despite their continued role in monitoring rule-of-law reforms, media freedom and public sector accountability. Supporting these actors would help preserve reform-oriented capacities developed during accession while broadening the visibility of Italy's engagement beyond state-to-state diplomacy.

As Montenegro moves closer to membership, the challenge is no longer whether Italy supports enlargement, but how that support is translated into accession-specific results. The twentieth anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2026 provides an occasion to address these gaps directly and to move from a relationship characterised by goodwill and parallel policy tracks towards a more structured accession partnership. Italy's EU Council Presidency in 2028 offers a further opportunity to anchor this agenda at the European level, potentially coinciding with the concluding phase of Montenegro's accession. But the presidency will only be an opportunity if the groundwork is laid beforehand – while Italian leverage remains greatest and before the most consequential decisions in Montenegro's accession process are effectively settled.

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