EL/LR/EC/eb
Brussels, 01 September 2026

To:
Roxana Mînzatu, Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness
Marta Kos, European Commissioner for Enlargement

[Letter sent by e-mail]

Follow-up to the ETUC/UFTUM/CTUM joint letter of 4 June 2026 and continued breakdown of social dialogue in Montenegro

Dear Executive Vice-President Mînzatu,

Dear Commissioner Kos,

On 4 June 2026, the ETUC, together with Montenegro's two representative national trade union confederations - the Union of Free Trade Unions of Montenegro (UFTUM) and the Confederation of Trade Unions of Montenegro (CTUM) - wrote to President von der Leyen and Commissioner Kos ahead of the EU-Western Balkans Summit to warn that the deterioration of social dialogue in Montenegro risked undermining progress on Chapter 19 (Social Policy and Employment).

We regret to inform you that, two and a half months on, the situation worsened and the General Collective Agreement (GCA) - the legal safety net for over 100,000 Montenegrin workers not covered by sectoral or company-level agreements - has now lapsed entirely.

We write to share information in view of the ongoing accession process ahead of the publication of the 2026 enlargement package's country recommendations.

Throughout 2025, trade unions, employers and the Government of Montenegro - all signatories to the GCA - negotiated intensively, through a dedicated Working Group, to prove for wage increases in both the public and private sectors. Trade unions and employers reached a compromise on raising wages through higher job-complexity coefficients and an increased coefficient calculation value, and jointly requested the Government to sign the resulting text. Rather than signing the negotiated text, the Government instead used a parliamentary amendment to the Labour Law in January 2026 to extend the validity of the old Agreement.

Further meetings were held with the Prime Minister, with the Government voicing support for wage increases in principle but insisting on finding a "better model" than the one agreed by the Working Group. No such alternative has ever been presented. Meetings, including of the Social Council and of the Working Group, have been postponed without explanation, and not rescheduled. As a result, the GCA expired in April.

Faced with the Government's refusal to engage, trade unions have exercised their legitimate right to industrial action. To date, the Government of Montenegro has not responded and the trade unions plan to intensify protest action.

At a joint meeting between representative social partners, the Government of Montenegro and the Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro in July, our affiliate UFTUM stated that social dialogue in Montenegro is being run in a manner that is neither constructive nor functional, and asked the Commission to treat this as a benchmark for the closure of Chapter 19 - specifically, to condition that closure on the establishment of functional social dialogue, in light of the expiry of the GCA.

This request is not a new demand: it echoes the Commission's own analysis. The 2025 Enlargement Package report on Montenegro (SWD(2025) 754) clearly recommended that Montenegro should "continue efforts to enhance social dialogue." The lapsing of the GCA and the lack of meetings of the tripartite Social Council are the opposite of what the Commission called for.

We also note that, at the 28th Accession Conference of 14 July 2026, the EU provisionally closed two further chapters and reaffirmed Montenegro's position as the frontrunner in the accession process. ETUC fully supports a merit-based, accelerated accession process for Montenegro. It is precisely because we support that process that we are concerned by the gap opening between the pace of chapter closures overall and the complete absence of progress on the social dialogue benchmark under Chapter 19. Closing chapters while the Government allows the country's central collective bargaining instrument to lapse, and while it disregards the Commission's own recommendation, risks sending the signal that this benchmark carries no real weight.

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We note the Commission's reply of 24 June 2026 (Ares(2026)6403664), in which the Director for the Western Balkans, Ms Valentina Superti, replied on behalf of President von der Leyen to UFTUM's Secretary General, Mr Srdja Keković. The reply confirmed that "meaningful social dialogue is a substantive pillar of Montenegro's EU accession process and membership," recalled Montenegro's obligation under Chapter 19 to "demonstrate a clear and measurable strengthening of social dialogue at all levels," and invoked the Council Recommendation of 12 June 2023 on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union (C/2023/1389). We welcome this restatement of principle, but must place on record our concerns.

First, the reply's call for "all relevant parties to cooperate ... and increase efforts to reach a General Collective Agreement" treats the impasse as a shared failing of the social partners. The record set out above does not support that reading. Trade unions and employers reached a joint compromise in 2025 and jointly asked the Government to sign it. It is the Government - as negotiating party, and as the party that must decide whether to sign - that has for eight months failed to sign the agreed text, failed to produce the "better model" it promised in its place, and unilaterally cancelled the sessions at which it undertook to present one. This has left around one third of the workforce in Montenegro without legal safety net. We ask the Commission to reflect this situation in its engagement with the government.

Secondly, judged against the Council Recommendation the Commission itself invokes, the Government's conduct falls short. That Recommendation calls for social partners to be involved "in a systematic, meaningful and timely manner" in the design of employment and social policy, and states that it "cannot, under any circumstances, be cited to justify reducing the level of support already afforded to social dialogue, including collective bargaining, within Member States." The unexplained cancellation meeting sessions, the use of a parliamentary amendment rather than the negotiated text to extend the GCA, and the Agreement's subsequent lapse, are not compatible with the standard the Commission has itself set.

Thirdly, the reply undertakes only that the Commission "will continue to convey this message to the Montenegrin authorities." Conveying the message without attaching consequences or stressing the urgency to remedy the situation will not move the Government. We ask that the Commission's engagement now go beyond restating expectations, and be accompanied by the explicit elements set out below.

Therefore we ask that the Commission:

1. Raise directly with the Government of Montenegro the expiry of the GCA;

2. Confirm, expressly and beyond general encouragement, that the closure of Chapter 19 will remain conditional on verifiable, practical progress on social dialogue, in line with the Commission's own 2025 recommendation, and will not be advanced while the GCA remains unresolved;

3. Take formal note, in the Commission's ongoing monitoring under Chapter 19, of the events set out in this letter, of UFTUM's representation to the EU Delegation in July, and of the Government's continued disregard of the concerns already conveyed to it; and

4. Grant, as requested in our letter of 4 June 2026 and renewed above, a joint meeting with ETUC and its Montenegrin affiliates at Commissioner and Executive Vice-President level to discuss concrete EU support for restoring functional social dialogue in Montenegro.

Montenegro's trade union movement has consistently supported the country's EU accession. It is precisely that commitment which obliges ETUC and its affiliates to insist that accession deliver real improvements for working people, and that the social dialogue benchmark under Chapter 19 be treated as a genuine condition, not a formality.

We thank you for your attention to this urgent matter and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Esther Lynch

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General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation