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Constructivism and Euro-Atlantic Integration Perspectives: The Case of Montenegro's Accession to NATO and the EU

Gabriel Enrique Sanchez Ramirez

Abstract

This article analyses the process of Montenegro's integration into NATO and the European Union (EU) from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism, in the field of International Relations, describes that international actors are not only guided by material interests, such as security and power but are also influenced by the norms, values, and identities they share. From this approach, the identity of a state is not fixed but is constructed and transformed through interaction with other actors and the adoption of new norms. Montenegro, in seeking to align itself with Western institutions, not only pursues strategic benefits but also seeks to redefine its national identity as a democratic and modern state.

A key concept in this context is normative socialization, which refers to the process by which a state internalizes the norms and principles of an international community. Through normative socialization, Montenegro has adopted reforms that reflect Euro-Atlantic values, such as democratic governance, strengthening the rule of law, and civilian control over the armed forces. However, this process has not been without challenges. Nevertheless, Montenegro has used integration to project a new pro-Western identity and consolidate its internal stability. The article concludes that the case of Montenegro illustrates how international organizations can act as agents of socialization, influencing the identity and political transformation of a candidate state in its accession process.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Constructivism, Balkan Stability, Euro-Atlantic Integration, Montenegro, NATO, Montenegro-European Union Accession, Normative Socialization.

Introduction

The process of Montenegro's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, particularly its accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2017 and its continued efforts to join the European Union (EU), has been widely discussed in the academic literature. However, much of the existing research tends to focus on the geopolitical and security dimensions, underestimating the impact that integration has on the country's identity transformation and its internal governance. Despite the fact that some authors approach integration from a materialistic approach, focusing on power and strategic advantages, there are few studies that analyze how this process has reshaped Montenegro's national identity.

Therefore, this article seeks to fill this gap by offering a constructivist analysis of Montenegro's integration process, highlighting how NATO membership and its path toward the EU represent not only a strategic alignment but also an effort to redefine its identity as a democratic state aligned with European values. Using the constructivist approach of Alexander Wendt, a renowned American political scientist for his contributions to Constructivism, we analyze how the integration process has been instrumental in the reconfiguration of national identity and the transformation of its internal political structures. This approach allows us to address not only Montenegro's political motivations but also the challenges and contradictions that have arisen on the way to the consolidation of its pro-European identity.

It will also describe the socialization process manifested in the adoption of political and judicial reforms required by the EU and NATO, which seek to strengthen the rule of law, promote good governance, and establish effective civilian control over security institutions. This process not only responds to the need to meet the technical requirements for accession but also to an effort to build a national identity based on the principles of democracy and regional stability. However, the road to integration has not been free of internal challenges and tensions, particularly in relation to the perception of these changes by the population and the government's capacity to implement deep reforms in a sustainable manner.

As a hypothesis, this paper takes into consideration the process of Montenegro's integration into NATO and its path towards accession to the European Union, which have served not only as a strategy of geopolitical alignment but also as a mechanism of identity transformation, using normative socialization to consolidate its pro-Western identity and reform its internal governance structure.

As a possible research question, it is described: how has the process of Montenegro's integration into NATO and its path towards the EU influenced the transformation of its national identity and the consolidation of its governance structures?

With regard to the division of this article, it is structured in three chapters: The first chapter describes the background of Montenegro as a nation state and the theory of Constructivism. The second chapter describes the process of Montenegro's integration into NATO, highlighting the security considerations as well as the consequences. Finally, the third chapter focuses on the description of the evolution of the integration process of this nation into the EU, also taking into consideration political and constructivist considerations.

Historical Background and Euro-Atlantic Vision of Montenegro

Montenegro (Crna Gora, Tsrna Gora, Tsernagora) is a country located in the Western Balkan region, a candidate member of the European Union (EU) as well as a member state of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 2017 (Poláčková & van Duin, 2013).

Its original name, "Crna Gora", is first mentioned in the Charter of King Milutin (of the Nemanjić dynasty) in 1296. It is believed that such a name comes from the dense forests that covered Mount Lovćen and its surroundings, which were so dark that onlookers had the impression of a "black" mountain. Starting from its modern history, after the Second World War in 1945, Montenegro improved its legal and state status and became one of the Six Equal Republics that made up the Yugoslav Federation (European Commission, 2024).

After the turbulent period of Yugoslavia's disintegration, Montenegro remained a joint state with Serbia, and these two republics formed the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Subsequently, on May 21, 2006, the majority of Montenegrin citizens voted in favor of Montenegrin independence in a referendum. This day was proclaimed as "Independence Day," and since then, Montenegro has been an internationally recognized independent state. The United Nations (UN) admitted Montenegro as Member State Number 192 on July 27, 2006 (Meeting Coverage and Press Release of the United Nations, 2006).

Today, after 18 years of independence (until 2024), Montenegro has two strategic objectives in its foreign policy that are considered to be of national interest: Euro-Atlantic and European integration. The first one materialized with its accession

to NATO on June 5, 2017, when this nation became a full member of the Alliance. The Second objective consists of Montenegro's accession to the EU as a member state, following the example of other states that were part of Yugoslavia, such as the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Slovenia.

Constructivism in International Relations

Constructivism was introduced by Nicholas Onuf in his work "*Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*" (1989). However, the term was popularized by the article "*Anarchy is What States Make of it*" (1992) and later by the book "*A Social Theory of International Politics*" (1999) by the American political scientist Alexander Wendt, considered by many as one of the main and pioneering works of Constructivism in International Relations (Sanchez, p.118).

In recent academic literature, it has become common to describe international politics as "*socially constructed*". Drawing on a variety of social theories, such as critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist theory, among others, scholars of international politics have accepted the basic tenets of "*Constructivism*": (1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposeful actors are constructed from these shared ideas rather than being given by nature. For Wendt (1999), the first of these principles represents an "idealist" approach to social life, and by emphasizing the sharing of ideas, it is also "social" in a way in which the opposite view of "materialism." However, social science focuses on biology, technology, and the environment is not. In this reasoning, the second principle is a "*holistic*" or "*structuralist*" approach, as it refers to the emergent powers of social structures. In contrast, individualism is restricted: all social structures are reduced to individuals. Therefore, constructivism is a form of "structural idealism". True, they recognize the social structure, but the social structure has a common formation.

Following this same line of ideas, Constructivism in International Relations implies: (1) human relations, also international relations, consist especially of thoughts and ideas, and not of forces or material conditions; (2) intersubjective beliefs (ideas, concepts, assumptions, among others) constitute the central ideological element for the constructivist approach; (3) this common belief composes and expresses people's interests and identities, the way they conceive their relations; (4) constructivists emphasize the way in which these relations are formed and expressed. That is, the social world is an intersubjective domain that, as such, possesses meanings for the people who shape it and live in it (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, pp. 392-393).

In other words, in constructivism, the elements studied are social constructions. These social constructions can be ideas, identities, interests, among others. From this point of view, conceptions of oneself and of other actors play a central role: identities. Constructivist authors assume that actors do not have a univocal identity but that they receive different identities depending on who defines them: in Wendt's words, *"the military power of the United States has a different meaning for Cuba than for Canada"* (Wendt, 1992, p. 25).

However, the most important identity version is the one that the actor defines for himself. Among other things, self-definition is constituted by constitutive norms (formal and informal norms that define membership in a group), social goals (goals shared by group members), relational comparisons (defining group identity through what it is not) and cognitive models (understanding and positions on political and material conditions and interests that are shaped by a particular identity) (Reality shock, n/d).

From a constructivist perspective, Montenegro's quest to join NATO and the European Union (EU) can be seen as a way of redefining its identity as a stable state aligned with the West. The decision to join the Military Alliance and seek membership in the European community bloc reflects a profound shift in Montenegro's identity, oriented towards a Euro-Atlantic approach that prioritizes security, democracy, and economic prosperity. In this process, normative socialization becomes a central factor, where the country not only formally adopts the norms and principles established by these institutions but also reshapes its national identity to align with Western values of governance and cooperation.

Normative socialization, according to constructivism, implies that states internalize the norms, values, and institutions shared by an international community in order to be accepted as legitimate members. This process transforms not only the practices and behavior of states but also their internal identities and interests. Applied to the case of Montenegro, integration into NATO and the EU has been a mechanism to consolidate its identity as a democratic and stable country in the Balkan region, differentiating it from other nations with a Slavic past closer to Russia (Wendt, 1999, p. 170). The adoption of significant reforms in the defense and security sector, as well as the implementation of policies to strengthen the rule of law, reflect not only an attempt to meet the technical requirements for accession but also to project a new national identity that responds to the expectations of its future European partners (Gheciu, 2005, p. 988).

Montenegro's Strategic Leaning Towards Europe

By strategic inclination towards Europe, it is understood that Montenegro seeks to strengthen its relations and alliances with European countries and institutions. Since its independence in 2006, this nation has expressed an interest in integrating more closely with Europe, both politically and economically.

Thus, this article identifies two (2) factors that are part of Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic and integration aspirations: NATO membership and EU membership. Both factors can be considered as a key manifestation of this strategic inclination.

Montenegro became a member state of the Military Alliance in 2017 and has been a candidate for EU membership since 2010 and has made progress in the accession process, albeit at a variable pace. The foreign policy pivot towards Europe rather than the Balkans starts from the study of a number of political, economic, and social considerations, such as access to wider markets, investment opportunities, and cooperation in a wide range of areas, from economics to security.

NATO Integration: Advantages, Challenges and Opportunities

Montenegro joined NATO on June 5, 2017, when the instrument of accession to the Washington Treaty was formally deposited with the U.S. State Department. According to NATO, the Allies have committed to "*keep NATO's door open to Western Balkan partners aspiring to join the Alliance*." These countries must share their values and be willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership, considering Euro-Atlantic integration "the strongest path to ensure security, long-term stability, *and sustainable development in the region*" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017).

The NATO Integration Process

The process of Montenegro's accession to the Military Alliance began with the establishment of the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which constituted a comprehensive advisory and support program tailored to the specific needs of aspiring countries seeking to join the military alliance. It is important to note that participation in the MAP, as an initial phase, does not imply an automatic commitment by the Alliance regarding the prospective membership of a country.

The beginning of Montenegro's first MAP cycle dates back to the autumn of 2010 when the country submitted its first Annual National Program. Through this

process, Montenegro identified critical challenges that required special attention, such as strengthening the rule of law, aligning security sector reforms with NATO standards, and combating corruption and organized crime (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017). Additionally, Montenegro started contributing to foreign military operations through its armed forces. Specifically, the country deployed 40 soldiers, a three-member military medical team, and two officers under German command to Afghanistan in 2010. Montenegrin Peacekeeping Forces were also deployed to Liberia and Somalia (Dickson & Harding, 2024).

In this context, in December 2015, NATO Allies made the decision to invite Montenegro to initiate accession talks to join the Alliance. Nevertheless, the Allies also emphasized their expectation that Montenegro would continue working on its reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017).

After a series of significant advancements, on June 5, 2017, Montenegro became the 29th member of NATO by submitting the instrument of ratification to the U.S. government, the depositary of the treaty (Government of Montenegro, 2024). During a ceremonial event, NATO Former Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized that the country's accession to the Alliance would contribute to international peace and security, while simultaneously sending a message that the Alliance's doors remain open to all aspiring states. This marked NATO's first enlargement since April 1, 2009, when the Republic of Albania and Croatia, both Balkan states, joined the Alliance. During the ceremony, Stoltenberg highlighted:

> "Today, Montenegro joins NATO with a seat at the table as an equal, with an equal voice in shaping our Alliance, and its independence guaranteed" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017).

Today, in Montenegro, reforms in the defense and security sectors remain fundamental aspects for the nation and a key factor in its cooperation with NATO. The Alliance and its member states possess substantial expertise in this area that Montenegro can leverage. Moreover, the Allies actively support the strengthening of democratic, institutional, and judicial reform processes in Montenegro. Additionally, the country participates in NATO's Building Integrity Program, which aims to enhance good governance in the defense and security sectors. This program seeks to raise awareness, promote best practices, and provide practical tools to improve integrity and reduce corruption risks through the strengthening of transparency and accountability.

Montenegro also collaborates with NATO in promoting the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, which acknowledges the disproportionate impact of war and conflict on women and children. This resolution calls for the full and equal participation of women at all stages related to conflict prevention, reconstruction, and post-conflict security, focusing on four main pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. In this context, Montenegro developed and implemented its first National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325 for the period 2017-2018, which focused on three key areas, defined nine operational objectives, and included 41 activities (Ministry of Defense of Montenegro, 2024).

Advantages of NATO Membership for Montenegro

A geopolitical analysis of the current context and the cooperative relationship between Montenegro and the Military Alliance highlights the significant role of this small Balkan nation, which, despite its relatively small size in terms of territory and population, holds notable geopolitical importance. Located in the Balkans region of Europe, Montenegro plays a strategic role in the regional context and has garnered international attention due to its geographical position and role in regional security. In this regard, NATO has played a crucial role in promoting stabilization in a region with a history of interethnic conflicts. Montenegro's accession to NATO aimed to further strengthen regional stability, in alignment with its objective of integration into the EU. For Montenegro, membership in both NATO and the EU represents fundamental pillars of political and social stability, as well as economic and commercial prosperity (Kochis, 2017).

Along the same lines, Perovic (2022) identifies security, political, and economic reasons as the three main categories supporting Montenegro's accession to the Military Alliance. Firstly, Montenegro's integration into the collective security system provides a long-term guarantee of its stability and security. Membership in the Alliance serves as a long-term safeguard for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, ensuring security for its citizens and the State. This foundation allows for the creation of a much stronger basis for achieving economic stability and increasing foreign investment, which, in the long run, could lead to positive economic effects such as increased investments, GDP growth, and the overall development of Montenegro's economy.

As previously described, it is important to note that Albania and Croatia are already NATO members, which underscores the strategic importance of the Balkan

region for the Alliance. Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina are candidate countries for NATO membership, reflecting the Alliance's interest in strengthening its presence in this region. Consequently, Montenegro's entry into NATO not only seeks to contribute to security and stability in the Balkans, but also to strengthen regional cooperation and integration while promoting and consolidating democratic institutions, fostering reconciliation among ethnic groups, and encouraging economic prosperity in the region. This, in turn, would contribute to achieving the desired long-term stability in the Balkans.

Although Montenegro has a relatively small military, it has proven to be a valuable partner for the United States and NATO. Its troops participated in the International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2014 and continue to support the Resolute Support operation by providing advisory and training support to Afghan security forces. Moreover, Montenegro donated 1,600 weapons and 250,000 rounds of ammunition to the Afghan National Army. In 2016, it hosted the *"Crna Gora"* civil emergency response exercise and has participated in the State Partnership Program with the Maine National Guard since 2006 (Kochis, 2017).

Geopolitically, Montenegro occupies a key position in the region. Together with Albania, Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy, it provides strategic control over the Adriatic Sea, a crucial factor for NATO. This position has served as a counterbalance to Russia's attempts to gain influence in the region. In fact, Moscow offered "*billions of dollars*" to establish military bases in Montenegro, but the government, under pressure from NATO, rejected these proposals (Iriarte, 2017).

Montenegro's accession to NATO is viewed as a significant political victory, especially considering the resistance from some opposition groups, allegedly supported by Russia. This membership not only strengthens national security but also marks a crucial step towards its integration into the EU (Iriarte, 2017).

Montenegro's NATO integration from a Constructivist perspective

As described by Alexander Wendt (1999), unlike other theories in International Relations, Constructivism stresses that international politics is socially constructed through the interaction between actors, meaning that states act in accordance with the norms they have internalized and the identities they seek to project. Following the same line of thought, Montenegro's integration into the Military Alliance can be interpreted as a process of constructive international socialization, where the country sought to align itself with the norms of security and democracy promoted

by the Alliance in order to consolidate its identity as a modern, pro-Western state (Saurugger, 2013, p.893-894).

The nation's integration cannot be fully understood without considering the context of its simultaneous aspiration for EU membership. NATO membership, from a constructivist perspective, became a key component of the pro-European identity that Montenegro sought to project. According to socialization theory, Montenegro's participation in the Alliance helped reinforce its image as a modern, democratic state committed to international cooperation.

Montenegro's Path towards the EU

Historical Background and Development of The Negotiations

Nowadays, European integration has become the most important objective of Montenegro's foreign policy. EU integration is also the most comprehensive and complex reform process the country has ever embarked on. It is a process that cuts across various social and political aspects, from security or human rights protection, to quality of life or economic standards. From 2010 to date, Montenegro is defined as a 'Candidate Country for EU membership'. (Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro, 2021).

The process of integration into the European bloc began in June 2006, when the Council of Europe, by recognizing Montenegro's independence, reaffirmed the country's pro-European vision. Thus, in September of the same year, a political dialogue was initiated at the ministerial level between the Government of Montenegro and the EU institutions. A year later, on 22 January 2007, the EU Council decided to approve a new European Partnership with Montenegro. The government's response was the adoption of an Action Plan to implement the European Partnership recommendations in May 2007. (Perovic, 2022).

Thus, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) was signed by the Montenegrin state on 15 October 2007 and entered into force on 7 May 2010 following its ratification by EU member states. The agreement was ratified by the Montenegrin Parliament on 13 November. This was followed by a reduction in visa conditions for Montenegrin citizens in the Schengen area. Then, on 15 December 2008, Montenegro submitted its application for EU membership. In accordance with Article 49 of the EU Treaty, on 23 April 2009, the Member States invited the European Commission to submit its opinion on the application. (Perovic, 2022).

A year later in December 2010, Montenegro became a 'candidate country' for EU membership. At the Brussels summit, EU leaders confirmed that negotiations for Montenegro's accession to the EU bloc would begin on 29 June 2012. As a result, in the same year, the government approved in the Acquis Commuautaire, the Decision for the establishment of a Working Group for the preparation of negotiations on Montenegro's entry (Perovic, 2022).

Subsequently, the European Commission's strategy for the Western Balkans in 2018 mentioned 2025 as a possible year for the accession of new members to the EU bloc. Subsequently, the date was changed, and 2028 was set as an estimated date for allowing Montenegro to join the EU as the 28th state while negotiations between the EU and the authorities in Podgorica are ongoing. The EU accession procedure is based on the successful negotiation of 35 chapters, each focusing on different areas such as justice, freedom, security, and various sectors of the economy. These negotiations started on Chapters 23 (Justice and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) in Brussels (Perovic, 2022). Thus, by 2024, Montenegro has opened all chapters and provisionally closed them, but substantial work remains to be done.

The following four provides a chronological overview of the opening of the negotiation chapters between Montenegro and the EU in Montenegro's EU accession process. The chapters represent different areas of EU legislation and policies that the country must comply with in order to advance its integration. The table shows the years in which specific negotiation chapters were opened, reflecting the progress made by Montenegro on its path towards EU accession.

Table N.1 Opening of Negotiation Chapters between Montenegro and the EU

Years	**Open Chapters**
2013	5, 6, 20, 23, 24
2014	7, 10, 3, 31, 32, 18, 28, 29, 33
2015	16, 30, 9, 21, 14, 15
2016	1, 2, 3, 12, 13, 11, 19
2018	17, 27
2020	8
2023	25, 26

Note: This table was compiled by the author using the following bibliography: "Montenegro: Integration Processes as A Guarantee of Security" by Miloš Perović, 2022, p 97.

And "28th member by 2028. Montenegro's goal for European Union membership", by EUnews, 2024, https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/01/30/28th-member-by-2028-montenegros-goal-for-european-union-membership/

Current Status of Negotiations and Challenges on the Road to EU Accession

Montenegro's European Union (EU) accession negotiations formally began on 29 June 2012, and to date, all accession chapters have been opened, with three of them provisionally closed. Among the Western Balkan countries seeking EU membership, Montenegro has stood out for its progress in negotiations, benefiting from comparative political stability and the absence of disputes with its neighbors. This progress has led many analysts to consider it the most advanced candidate in the accession process despite its small population of just over 600,000, suggesting that its integration could be more manageable for the EU bloc (Bellamy, 2023).

For 2024, the negotiating context presents both opportunities and challenges. With the election of Milojko Spajic as Prime Minister in October 2023, there has been a renewed commitment to reform implementation and enhanced security cooperation. The Montenegrin government's vision is aligned with the desire of other countries in the region, such as Ukraine and Moldova, to accelerate their EU integration processes, which has created a favourable environment for progress in negotiations (Bechev, 2024). In addition, progress has been made in key areas such as strengthening judicial governance and police cooperation in the fight against transnational crime.

In the short term, the Montenegrin government's objective is to meet the benchmarks set by the EU in the area of rule of law and fundamental freedoms, with the goal of closing further negotiation chapters before October 2024, when the European Commission will issue its annual assessment of candidate countries. The EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), meeting in March 2024, reaffirmed the country's commitment to become the 28th member of the EU by 2028. The co-chairs of the meeting, Decebal-Ștefan Bădăluță, and Gordana Đurović, underlined the importance of meeting the benchmarks set for the rule of law, stressing the need for close cooperation between Montenegrin and EU institutions to advance the accession process (The European Economic and Social Committee, 2024).

However, Montenegro's accession to the EU is not without significant challenges. The European Commission has repeatedly pointed to the need for far-reaching reforms, especially in the judicial area and the fight against corruption, which are crucial components of chapters 23 and 24 of the negotiations. Institutional stability and the independence of the judiciary are key conditions that Montenegro must fulfill in order to make progress in its accession process. In January 2023, the

European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement emphasized that rule-of-law areas must be prioritized if the country is to maintain its leading position among the region's candidates (Jiménez, 2024).

Montenegro's EU Integration as Seen Through the Lens of Constructivism

In the case of Montenegro, the EU integration process can be understood as an effort to build and project a national identity aligned with European standards of democracy, rule of law, and good governance. This perspective underlines that the accession process has not only been an act of technical compliance with EU requirements but also a way of redefining the country's identity and securing its recognition as a legitimate member of the European community (Islamov, 2022, p. 518).

In the case of Montenegro, EU integration has been seen as a normative socialization in which the country has adopted the reforms demanded by Brussels, not only to meet the technical criteria but also to consolidate its identity as a democratic country aligned with Western values (Checkel, 1999, p. 548). This process involves the adoption of political and institutional reforms that transform the internal structure of the country, bringing it into line with the European normative framework.

The accession process, which formally began in 2012, has seen the opening of all negotiation chapters, and to date, three of them have been provisionally closed. This progress reflects a systematic effort by Montenegro to internalize European standards and project itself as a model of stability in the Western Balkans, unlike its neighbors with more complex political disputes (Draskovic 2008, p. 115).

Similarly, it is necessary to describe that Montenegro's European integration has also had a significant impact on the transformation of its governance system. The adoption of negotiating chapters 23 and 24, focusing on the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, has been particularly important. These chapters call for reforms in the judicial system and effective measures to combat corruption, which is seen as a key component for the consolidation of a European identity based on justice and transparency (Gheciu, 2005, p. 986).

The reforms needed to meet EU requirements imply not only structural changes but also a process of redefining political identity. According to Djurovic and Lajh (2020), the construction of Montenegro's European identity has been largely based on its commitment to standards of good governance and the strengthening of democratic institutions (Djurovic & Lajh, 2020, p. 3). This process has served

not only to consolidate its position within the Balkans, but also to differentiate it from other countries in the region that have been slower to advance their European aspirations.

Conclusion

The process of Montenegro's integration into NATO and the European Union is a clear example of how normative socialization dynamics and constructivist influence can transform a state's identity. Through this process, Montenegro has sought to redefine its national identity, projecting itself as a democratic, modern country aligned with Euro-Atlantic values. However, the transformation has not only been a matter of normative adaptation but also of institutional and political reform, which has required sustained commitment on the part of the Montenegrin authorities.

From a constructivist perspective, Montenegro's integration cannot be understood solely as a strategic or geopolitical move but as a process of identity transformation that has changed the internal and external perception of the country. As Montenegro has adopted the norms and principles promoted by NATO and the EU, it has consolidated its image as a reliable partner in the Balkan region, highlighting its commitment to the rule of law, stability, and democratic governance. This has allowed Montenegro to differentiate itself from other Balkan nations with more complicated paths to European integration.

Nevertheless, Montenegro's trajectory has not been without challenges. Internal resistance, the influence of external powers such as Russia, and difficulties in implementing deep reforms in areas such as fighting corruption and strengthening the judiciary have slowed Montenegro's path towards full EU membership. Despite these obstacles, the country has managed to make progress in most negotiation chapters, positioning itself as a leader in the region in terms of European integration.

Ultimately, the case of Montenegro demonstrates how normative socialization and constructivism can serve as tools for transforming the identity and political structure of a small state in a complex international environment. Its integration into NATO and its path towards the EU is not only a reflection of its strategic aspirations but also a manifestation of its desire to consolidate a pro-Western identity and secure its long-term stability in the Western Balkans.

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