

A Step toward Regional Stability: Montenegro Joins NATO

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On 5 June 2017, Montenegro became the 29th member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Not surprisingly, it was almost a footnote in the international agenda of an eventful year; it was also a (seemingly) foregone conclusion since NATO had issued a formal invitation to join the Alliance on 2 December 2015. However its relevance for the region, let alone for the small Balkan country, cannot be underestimated. It further tips the balance toward security and stability. We are still a long way from the ultimate goal, but this is another step in the right direction.

Enlargements, whether through NATO or the European Union, enable new members to move away from instability and, therefore, toward stability. In addition, unlike previous enlargements, Montenegro's membership comes against the backdrop of rising tensions in Europe and competition for influence in the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean; and it was met with strong opposition from Russia. Although Moscow was eventually unsuccessful, its attempt to derail Podgorica's NATO membership was indicative of its current hostility towards the Alliance – wherever it may be. Just ten years ago, when Croatia and Albania joined NATO, Russia hardly raised an eyebrow.

The fact that Montenegro's Atlantic move went almost unnoticed in the Mediterranean context is understandable but short-sighted. True, there are other much more serious concerns, if not emergencies (Syria, Libya, immigration and terrorism spring to mind), but the Adriatic remains part of the Mediterranean. Being on the relative periphery does not shelter it from the dynamics at play in the wider 'Middle Sea,' such as, for example, the sudden wave of Syrian refugees along the 'Balkan route' in 2015. Podgorica's entry into NATO does not bring much to the Alliance in terms of military capabilities, but does have wider geopolitical and security implications in Europe and in the Mediterranean. With Montenegro in the Atlantic Alliance the Adriatic has become a NATO lake: its shores are an uninterrupted ring of NATO countries, but for the tiny, 20-kilometre-long, Bosnia-Herzegovina coastline.

In a nutshell, Podgorica's entry into NATO shows that the process of Euro-Atlantic integration of southeastern Europe has not ground to a halt. This is good news for the other countries that have so far remained outside of the NATO and/or European Union tent. It is good news for NATO that, like the EU, it retains some kind of 'power to attract' that pushes candidates toward reforms, rule of law and modernization. It should be encouraging news for an EU that has allowed the Western Balkans' enlargement to drift to the backburner of the Juncker Commission, but is now trying to re-energize the process. It was bad news for Russia, but only because Moscow chose to oppose it and ended up on the losing side.

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Montenegro's NATO membership matters for the country itself and for the Western Balkan-Adriatic region as a whole. The two perspectives are inter-related but need to be assessed separately.

Montenegro's Choice

For Podgorica, NATO membership is a major leap forward toward a Western-oriented future. It obviously comes with the Washington Treaty's standard guarantees, namely Article 5 on security insurance, and obligations; but above all it has to do with identity and a sense of belonging. By entering NATO, Montenegro has chosen what and where it wants to be: a 'Western' nation. There was nothing automatic in squarely positioning itself in the Atlantic quarters; on the contrary, it took a controversial domestic decision and further distancing from Serbia.

For the Western Balkan countries, NATO and the EU are strategic goals. The two organizations also define the identity they are seeking while still emerging from the separation imposed by the Cold War and from the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia – similar identity issues, incidentally, apply to the countries of the former Soviet Union. For nearly half a century the Cold War split Europe into two halves. Nations east of the Iron Curtain were cut off politically, economically and culturally from the mainstream of western Europe. To rejoin it – if they choose to – they need to reposition themselves within the multilateral network that was slowly but systematically built in Europe and across the Atlantic after World War II. Richard Holbrooke described it as 'interlocking institutions,' including organizations like OSCE and the Council of Europe. The Atlantic Alliance and the European Union are the hard core. While security and prosperity motivate candidate countries to apply for either, or both, the road to membership is also a crucial step in their quest for identity. This is what 'Euro-Atlantic integration' is all about.

NATO candidature has been a decisive factor in defining Montenegro's identity, whose nationhood is barely 12 years old. The last country to emerge from the former Yugoslavia, Montenegro became independent on 3 June 2006. The process of separation from Serbia was peaceful but met with considerable internal opposition, as well as from Belgrade. The decision eventually went down to the wire: a refer-

endum was held on 21 May 2006 and 55.5% of the voters supported independence, just above the 55% minimum threshold.

The independence drive was led by the then (and current) Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic. The rationale was a thin one: Montenegro could not take the path of democratic and Western-oriented reforms unless it cut its ties with Belgrade and become a sovereign state. According to Djukanovic, being part of the Federation, even after Slobodan Milosevic's fall, was preventing Montenegro from setting a new course and pursuing it. The independence aftermath has proved him right: Montenegro has 'moved West' to an extent that Serbia has been, and remains, unwilling to do. Both countries are now EU candidates: Belgrade has also taken the European path and is not looking back. But NATO makes the difference: Montenegro is a member, while Serbia remains a rather hesitant Atlantic partner.

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For Djukanovic's strategy to succeed, Montenegro had to differentiate itself from Serbia *after independence*. Geopolitically, Podgorica's NATO membership fulfills three strategic purposes: distancing from Belgrade, aligning with its neighbours (Albania, Croatia, and Slovenia) and anchoring the Atlantic community. Not bad for a tiny, ten-year old (when it joined) Balkan country. Psychologically, Montenegro has made a break with the past and chartered a new course into the future. Serbia, where NATO is still a toxic word, is struggling to free itself from the shackles of the past. Therefore, if the rationale for Montenegro's independence and nationhood hung in the balance in 2006, subsequent developments have vindicated it. NATO membership can offer further consolidation.

Regional Consequences

The Western Balkans have made enormous progress since the tragic wars, humanitarian crimes and multiple crises of the 1990s. But much remains to be done. Progress has been unequal. Some countries have advanced well and fast, others at a slower pace, and some risk being left behind. There are major unresolved issues in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. Now it has passed the emergency phase, Balkan 'fatigue' has kicked in, the focus of international attention has shifted to other parts of the world, local leaders' political determination to stabilize and reform has often been wanting to various degrees. There are notable exceptions to the latter: countries that keep moving forward. Montenegro is a case in point, as its NATO membership clearly demonstrates.

Beyond its importance for the Montenegrins, entry into NATO is, actually, a small but significant step toward overall regional stabilization for the Balkans, which has been a major challenge on the international agenda for nearly two centuries. Attempts at establishing hegemony (Greater Serbia or Bulgaria and the like), at integration and at disintegration have all failed over time. In the aftermath of Yugoslavia's implosion, Euro-Atlantic integration – that is merging the region with the rest of Europe and with the Atlantic community – appears to be the only promising option, following in the wake of the Eastern Balkans. The alternative would be isolation, which would inevitably bring with it infighting and decline.

Geography never lies: the Western Balkans have nowhere else to go, except toward the Euro-Atlantic space. A quick look at a map of southeastern Europe shows that the Western Balkans are completely surrounded by EU and NATO countries, on both land and sea. There is not a single centimetre of 'Balkan' border that does not meet the Union *and* the Alliance; the only exception would be the Slovenia-Austria border, since Austria is an EU member, but not in NATO (but Slovenia is both).

The progress report of the Western Balkans Euro-Atlantic journey shows a wildly diversified landscape. Two countries, Slovenia and Croatia, have entered both NATO and the EU; two more, Albania and Montenegro, are NATO members; all the others are in the waiting lines, but at very different stages.

With regard to the EU, all six non-EU members are in the membership pipeline. Serbia and Montenegro have already initiated the long process of negotiating accession; Albania and Macedonia could soon join them following a positive recommendation from the EU Commission (Brussels is making a parallel effort to overcome Skopje's 'naming' dispute with Greece); Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are 'potential' candidates only. Sarajevo is largely paralyzed by domestic differences on the electoral law and by its long-term divergence with Republika Srpska; Kosovo is hindered by non-recognition by a number of EU Member States, led by Spain. Nevertheless, Pristina is making progress in its relationship with its neighbours and continues to negotiate with Belgrade through EU-'facilitated' dialogue. With regard to NATO, Macedonia is a partner that could easily become a member: only the 'naming' dispute stood in its way at the Alliance's Bucharest summit ten years ago; Bosnia is a partner with little chance to join any time soon; Serbia is a partner not wishing to join; Kosovo would like to be a partner, and subsequently a member, but for the time being cannot be either because of opposition from countries that refuse to recognize it.

The snapshot captures the majority of Western Balkan countries well on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration but still in the grey area of transition and at different stages of advancement. Stability for the entire region will be achieved only when the process is completed and the EU and/or NATO umbrella is extended to all, with no exception. That applies especially to Serbia, which remains the single most important piece of the Western Balkan puzzle. In all likelihood, Belgrade will not seek NATO membership, but it is essential that it be anchored inside the EU. The roadmap will have to include recognition of Kosovo, as the Union cannot afford, and will not allow, to take in a new member with unresolved and pending disputes.

Euro-Atlantic integration is a tectonic regional shift from regional anarchy to stabilization within a more comprehensive architecture. Fits and starts are inevitable. Every new entry into NATO or the EU has the net effect of reducing the grey area, increasing overall stability and keeping momentum. This is exactly what Montenegro's NATO membership has achieved. The balance has been tipped toward stability. Now, more of the same is needed.