

BULLETIN

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The Challenges of NATO Enlargement to the Balkans

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Despite widespread support from the NATO Member States for enlargement to the Balkans, the conclusions from the Chicago Summit indicated that, during the next meeting, only Montenegro might be invited to join. Meanwhile, the alliance should seek consensus to accept the other countries aspiring to membership, including Macedonia, which has recently experienced further ethnic tensions. Poland should take advantage of its presidency of the Visegrad Group, to provide active support for the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Western Balkan countries.

NATO's Position on Enlargement to the Balkans. The only de facto direction of NATO enlargement in recent times has been to the Western Balkans. Turkey is distinctive among member states which actively support further enlargement to the region, as the country regularly calls for acceleration of this process. The United States is in favour of the Balkan states' accession to NATO, although it does not act in pursuit of this goal as intensively as it did in the case of the Central European countries. From the perspective of the U.S., the situation in the Balkans is stable, and enlargement should be preceded by the resolution of disputes between the neighbours. During the last enlargement in 2009, NATO was joined only by Albania and Croatia; Slovenia—which was part of Yugoslavia—had already joined in 2004.

Balkan Countries' Attitudes to the Alliance. The Balkan countries' policies towards NATO, as well as public support for membership of the organisation, are determined by a perception of NATO seen mainly through the prism of its interventions in armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Serbia is the only Balkan nation to have opposed NATO expansion in this region, because the bombings in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the mid 90s, and in Yugoslavia during the Kosovo conflict in 1999, affected territories inhabited and administered by Serbs. In contrast, the Yugoslav army operations in the territories which were outside present-day Serbia, especially in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, meant that these countries have showed special interest in membership of the alliance. The concerns of a threat from the neighbouring country intensified after the conflict in Kosovo. The ethnic conflict in Macedonia in 2001, and the deployment of the NATO contingent afterwards, influenced the perception of the alliance by the government in Skopje, seen then as a guarantor of the stability and integrity of the state.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia have expressed a will to join NATO. These are the only countries covered by the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which aims to prepare them for accession through the reform of security sector institutions. This is the last stage of cooperation before membership is granted, although the timing of its implementation depends on the degree of preparedness of the aspiring countries, and the political factors that condition the enlargement of the alliance. Military expenditures of these states range from 1.2% to 1.9% of GDP.

The Prospects for NATO Enlargement to the Balkans. During the Chicago Summit in May, Montenegro's preparations for membership, including its active role in regional cooperation and military reforms, were praised highly by the alliance. Therefore, it can be assumed that if the country continues to fulfil its obligations under the MAP, it could expect an invitation to join NATO at the next summit in two years.

For Macedonia—which has fulfilled the conditions for membership in the alliance but has been vetoed since 2008 by Greece because of a dispute about the country's official name—accession

to NATO constitutes now a higher priority than joining the EU, and prospects of the latter being realised are substantially more distant. According to the government in Skopje, membership in the alliance would provide the stability needed to increase foreign investments, which would strengthen the country's weak economy. Moreover, recent months' incidents and protests of an ethnic nature—which have been the largest since 2001—indicate the level of risk of internal conflict. Macedonia did not get closer to joining NATO despite the favourable verdict of the International Court of Justice in December 2011. The court pointed to the violation of the agreement between the two countries by Greece, which was obliged—among other things—not to block Macedonia's membership of international organisations.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, by contrast, reforms of the security and defence sector have been delayed, modernisation of the army has been slow, and a common vision among the three constitutional peoples (Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs) of the country's presence in NATO is lacking. Although the main political parties support NATO membership, Republika Srpska does so on the conditions of Serbia's accession to the alliance, and with a referendum. Nevertheless, only a third of Republika Srpska's population supports Bosnia's integration with NATO, with more than 80% of the support coming from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Serbia is not interested in accession to the alliance (public support for membership is little over 12%). This policy will be maintained by the new president, Tomislav Nikolić, and a new government, probably accompanied by increased anti-NATO rhetoric and declarations of intentions to strengthen cooperation with Russia. Moreover, statements from President Nikolić, such as raising doubts about genocide in Srebrenica, do not serve the reconciliation process in the region and could destabilise relations with neighbours. Only a few political parties are in favour of Serbia's integration with NATO.

While Kosovo is not currently being considered as a future member of the alliance, the government of this country declares its willingness to join. However, Kosovo is not recognised as an independent country by some member states, and the development of the security sector—in the absence of the army—is at an early stage. Furthermore, because of the ongoing instability, more than 6,000 NATO troops are still deployed in Kosovo.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Further enlargement of NATO to the Balkans will serve to consolidate the security of the countries in the region, and will not strengthen the strategic capabilities of the Alliance. Because of their small demographic potential, those Balkan countries which aspire to membership do not have a high military capacity. They do not allocate 2% of GDP to the military, (a quota recommended by the alliance but not met by most members). However, the participation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan has already shown support for NATO at the pre-accession phase.

Only Montenegro has a chance for membership in NATO in the near future. Macedonia could count on accession only after resolution of the dispute with Greece, which, given the present lack of cooperation between the two governments in this area, remains unlikely. Meanwhile, recent events in Macedonia unveiled its susceptibility to internal instability. Keeping the country out of the alliance in the case of the possible inflammation of ethnic unrest could also lead to destabilisation in neighbouring Kosovo and in the South of Serbia. In the face of decreasing U.S. involvement in Europe, and the ineffectiveness of the UN representative's mission in resolving the name dispute, European members of NATO in particular should seek solidarity with regard to enlarging the Alliance to include Macedonia.

While Serbia is not interested in joining NATO, it should be noted that, paradoxically, the new authorities' rhetoric towards the alliance on one hand, and support for membership from some of the opposition parties on the other, may be a harbinger of a wider public debate on this subject in the coming years. Progress in European integration, and in dialogue with Kosovo, could also prove favourable.

The favourable conditions include Polish involvement through stabilisation missions in the region (250 Polish soldiers still serve in Kosovo, and 70 in Bosnia). Some European NATO members already form a group of countries that have advocated Macedonia's membership of the alliance. Poland could back up such a coalition, and would certainly find partners for this among other V4 countries. It is worth maintaining the Hungarian, Slovak, and Czech tradition of convening a V4 summit devoted to the Western Balkans. Political declaration of support not only for the EU, but also for the NATO ambitions of the Balkan states, would be an important voice in the debate. The meeting could include other countries from this part of Europe, such as Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and even Croatia, as such a broad formula worked well in the past. Sharper Polish political commitment in the Balkans will in the future result not only in more efficient cooperation with these countries within NATO structures, but also within the EU, which, from the Polish point of view is important—among other things—because of the need to build a broad coalition to support EU actions in the east.