

# NATO Enlargement – Back on the Agenda

*Karsten Friis*

For the first time since 2009, enlargement is back on the NATO agenda. The process has been fuelled by the events in Ukraine and the subsequent strained relations between the West and Moscow: Western leaders see a need to counter Russia's attempts at 'divide and rule' policies and solidify the Western security anchoring in countries seeking membership in the alliance. However, due to various political obstacles, in practice there is only one country that appears likely to get an invitation to join NATO at the upcoming Warsaw Summit in July 2016 – and that is Montenegro.

Of all the members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), there are some – like Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland – that have remained reluctant to join NATO, predominantly for historical reasons. Russia's new and assertive international approach has yet to change the mood in these countries as regards NATO membership, although closer partnership ties with Finland and Sweden were agreed at the Wales Summit in September 2014.

Another reluctant country is Serbia, which has been trying to balance its foreign policy between the West and Russia. It relies on Russian support in the UN Security Council to prevent Kosovo from becoming a UN-recognized state, and has certain historical bonds with Moscow. Serbia's NATO-scepticism stems mainly from the 1999 bombing, but Yugoslavia's Cold War non-alignment identity hold some attraction in today's Serbia as well. Nonetheless, in January 2015 it signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO, which in practical terms

means that defence sector reforms being carried out in accordance with NATO standards. The joint visit of the Serbian ministers of defence and foreign affairs to NATO in March 2015 is also a clear political signal of priorities. Serbia is a strong supporter of KFOR in Kosovo, and is planning numerous military joint exercises with NATO countries this year. Serbian military cooperation with Russia has been minuscule, by comparison.

Then there are four countries currently seeking NATO membership: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Both Georgia and Macedonia are considered more or less 'ready' in terms of implemented security sector reforms, democratic oversight, rule of law (RoL) etc. However, given the current geo-political climate and Georgia's unsettled relationship with Russia regarding the two breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the West is not particularly eager to invite Georgia into the Alliance. Macedonia has remained blocked by Greece due to its peculiar objection to the constitutional name, 'Macedonia', claiming that Macedonia have 'irredentist and territorial ambitions'.<sup>1</sup> As a result of stalled integration into NATO and EU, democratization and reform have been slipping back in Macedonia, as shown by recent political scandals, demonstrations and violence. Although NATO membership could offer a pillar of internal and regional stabilization for Macedonia, no invitation will be forthcoming as long as Greece objects to it.

<sup>1</sup> The official Greek position on the dispute can be found here: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/fyrom-name-issue/>

Bosnia-Herzegovina has a standing invitation to get Membership Action Plan (MAP) status, on the condition that 63 defence properties in the country are registered as state property, for use by the country's defence ministry. However, Bosnia-Herzegovina is torn internally between the entities of the Federation and Republika Srpska (RS), with the latter predominantly negative towards NATO. RS is also reluctant to transfer ownership of its military properties to Bosniak-dominated Sarajevo, although some progress has been achieved lately. Fear and distrust between ethnic groups still overshadow the future, 20 years after the end of the war. Russia has increasingly supported the RS position in Bosnia's Peace Implementation Council in recent months, making reforms even harder to achieve.

That leaves Montenegro. The tiny Adriatic state will hardly strengthen NATO's military capacities, but it has had MAP-status since 2009 – and peace and stability in the Western Balkans are of crucial importance for Europe. Furthermore, from the perspective of Montenegro and the region in general, NATO membership does count. Neighbouring Croatia and Albania are already members, whereas other neighbours, as noted above, remain in a somewhat shaky security situation. In addition, economic challenges, unemployment, corruption, social inequality, pressure on the media and continued ethnic tensions still threaten to undermine democratic reforms and stability in the region. And finally, Russian influence appears to be on the rise, aimed at filling any political vacuum left open by the West. In this context, a NATO invitation to Montenegro would be a stabilizing factor and demonstrate that hard work and reform eventually pay off. The Montenegrin authorities hope to get such an invitation at the North Atlantic Council in December this year.

Montenegro had been hoping for an invitation already at the Wales Summit, but got instead this promise: 'In recognition of Montenegro's progress towards NATO membership, the Alliance has agreed to open intensified and focused talks with Montenegro, and agreed that Foreign Ministers will assess Montenegro's progress no later than by the end of 2015 with a view to deciding on whether to invite Montenegro to join the Alliance.'<sup>2</sup> Since then, the Montenegrin authorities have been working intensively to deal with all remaining shortcomings, on numerous levels.

On the practical level, the NATO integration process for countries with MAP status is primarily conducted through the *Annual National Programmes* (ANP): annual strategies with clear objectives and milestones in several sectors, defined by the candidate country itself in cooperation with NATO. Montenegro is currently working on the basis of its fifth ANP, presented in Brussels in October 2014. It focuses on four sectors: security sector reform, strengthening RoL, increasing public support for accession to NATO, and continuation of the defence sector reform. The RoL requirements go far beyond the defence sector, and concern issues like corruption, organized crime, money laundering and trafficking. This part of the process is closely associated with Montenegro's on-going EU negotiations in Chapters 23 (*Judiciary and fundamental rights*) and 24 (*Justice, freedom and security*). NATO is likely to look to the EU for assessments of progress here; in addition, the USA has bilaterally demanded concrete steps to be prioritized and implemented, including anti-corruption measures and intelligence reform.

Among Montenegro's main internal challenges is the muted public support for NATO membership. The population is split: one third in favour, one third against and one third undecided, with the battle primarily over the latter third. Those who are opposed to NATO membership tend to be people who identify themselves as Serbs, and those with particular negative experience of the 1999 NATO bombing which also hit Montenegro, albeit in a limited way. But no realistic alternative to NATO is on the agenda, and according to some polls a majority of the population believe that the country will eventually join NATO, irrespective of their personal views. The authorities have aimed at getting more than 50% support for membership, but this has proven difficult. The latest polls show about 40%, despite massive campaigning. NGOs have criticized the authorities for conducting a boring and unengaging campaign.<sup>3</sup> NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg recently expressed 'regrets' over the loss of innocent lives in Montenegro during the 1999 NATO air campaign, a statement probably aimed at assisting the authorities in persuading the public.<sup>4</sup> That being said, should the authorities fail in these efforts, NATO countries that are currently reluctant to enlargement may become even more sceptical.

2

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 95 in the Wales Summit Declaration: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm)

<sup>3</sup> 'Raonić: Kampanja za članstvo u NATO pomalo dosadna', *Analitika*, 28 March 2015: <http://portalanalitika.me/clanak/181453/raonic-kampanja-za-clanstvo-u-nato-pomalo-dosadna>

<sup>4</sup> 'NATO Chief "Sincerely Regrets Civilian Deaths" in 1999 Bombing', *Balkan Insight*, 15 June 2015: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/nato-chief-sincerely-regrets-civilian-deaths-in-1999-bombing-1>

At the end of the day however, the decision to invite Montenegro or not is a political one. The formal requirements are tougher than in previous rounds, but there are no formal lists of targets or criteria to be fulfilled – nor is there any automatic invitation if certain measures are implemented. Most observers regard the Montenegrin defence sector as being ‘sufficiently’ reformed to be approved for membership, although continued efforts are needed – indeed, as in NATO itself. Within the Alliance it is particularly the neighbouring countries that have been promoting Montenegro’s candidacy. Also Serbia is said to be positive. As usual, it is France that has expressed greatest scepticism towards enlargement,<sup>5</sup> while the USA, the UK and Germany now appear supportive of Montenegro’s bid. The remainder of the 28 NATO countries have a more passive stance, but some seem to express certain concerns regarding Montenegro’s RoL status.

However, the fact that Montenegro (in contrast to, for instance, Serbia) has signed up to the EU sanctions against Russia certainly also weighs in positively in most Western capitals – in Washington DC in particular. Given the significant Russian investments in Montenegrin coastal properties, the sanctions may prove costly for Montenegro’s crucial tourism industry this season. These Russian investments are generally not applauded in Montenegro, as they tend to be associated with money laundering and have contributed only modestly to the modernization of the industry itself. There are also rumours that Russian money is financing the two anti-NATO campaigns in Montenegro and that they are involved in a recent bizarre claim from neighbouring Bosnia to a part of the Montenegrin coastline.<sup>6</sup> It has also been claimed that events at the recent scandalous football match between Montenegro and Russia, adjourned due to the anti-Russian behaviour of Montenegrin fans, were staged by the secret service in Montenegro. Such conspiracy theories are typical of the region, but there can be little doubt that there is indeed a parallel struggle over NATO taking place behind the scenes.

Another challenge for Montenegro is its limited achievements as regards democracy. Several inde-

pendent institutions have been established and strengthened in recent decades, but the political and economic elite have remained the same for the past 20 years. Prime Minister Djukanovic, often called the ‘political survivor of the Western Balkans’, is controversial internally and internationally for his alleged links to organized crime. Irrespective of the truth of such accusations, the fact that the same people have governed the country for so long is an unhealthy sign in any aspiring democracy. The Western strategy has been to induce change and reforms through the EU and NATO integration processes, hoping that democracy will emerge bottom-up. To date this has proven rather successful, although the uppermost echelons of power have stayed unchanged.

It seems that Djukanovic is assisted by the erratic behaviour of Putin, which is making it geo-politically more important to enlarge and strengthen NATO to face up to Russia than to putting continued pressure on reform in Montenegro. As one US diplomat put it: *before Ukraine we were asking: why enlargement? Now we ask: why not?* Furthermore, the recent events in Macedonia demonstrate how dangerous a stalled integration and reform process could be, and also how Russia may seek to exploit this to its own ends.<sup>7</sup> Still, one cannot rule out that an invitation to Montenegro from North Atlantic Council in December will be conditional on continued reforms before the Warsaw Summit in July 2016.<sup>8</sup> It remains up to each and every one of NATO’s 28 members to support an invitation. But unless the Montenegrin government completely fails to swing the domestic mood, or fails to convince NATO that it has delivered on its reforms, Montenegro is more likely than not to be invited to join NATO at the upcoming Summit.

Irrespective of the exact timing, eventual NATO enlargement to MAP countries is a positive development and a stabilizing factor in Europe. Keeping up the momentum of reform is crucial in this respect, as NATO (and EU) membership after all not only is a goal in itself but also a means to achieve democratic and stable societies. Both NATO and the leaders of the aspiring countries should work hard to make sure it will not be another six years before the next round of enlargement.

5 See ‘Hollande Statement On Halting NATO Enlargement Under Scrutiny’, *RFL*, 4 March 2015: <http://www.rferl.org/content/nato-hollande-statement-enlargement-georgia-montenegro/26882183.html>

6 See ‘Montenegro PM: Bosnia Claim to Coast Destructive’, *Balkan Insight*, 28 January 2015: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/montenegro-s-pm-slates-bosnia-over-territorial-claim>

7 See ‘Macedonia Becomes Latest Stage for Russian Tensions With the West’, *Wall Street Journal*, 2 June 2015: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/macedonia-becomes-latest-stage-for-russian-tensions-with-the-west-1433202972>

8 According to the Montenegrin newspaper *Vijesti*, this is a rumour in diplomatic circles: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/stoltenberg-nismo-vas-pozvali-iz-velsa-zbog-nedovoljne-borbe-protiv-korupcije-837797>

## NATO enlargement: stages



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