

NATO AND SECURITY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA IMPACT AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), comprised of 32 member states from North America and Europe, represents the largest military and political alliance of today. Membership in NATO is widely accepted as a guarantee of security, but it has been a subject of political conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina for an extended period, as well as in other countries in the region. Currently, all Western Balkan countries (Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro) except Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Serbia are full members of NATO. Under the guise of military neutrality, the Republic of Serbia rejects the desire for full NATO membership, citing the NATO bombing of the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 as a key argument against joining. Bosnia and Herzegovina initially had unanimous support for full NATO membership after the signing of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but over time, this support weakened and transformed into open opposition from representatives of the Republika Srpska entity. The lack of a pragmatic and thorough assessment of the interests of joining NATO, considering regional and global developments, Russian influence on the Balkans and the fact that there is a new reordering of the fragmented order in which military-political neutrality loses its meaning, further complicates the integration process in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Analyze of the impact of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership in NATO and its consequences are in focus of this paper.

Keywords: NATO, Security, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded in 1949 with the signing of the Washington Agreement, and today it has 32 member states from North America and Europe. NATO's main goal is to protect the freedom and security of its allies by political and military means. Contemporary challenges and threats impose the need to plan military and non-military operations to ensure freedom and security (Kupiecki, 2015:5-14).

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is better known by the abbreviation NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). "The North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) was formed at the initiative of the USA. In the middle of 1948 (July 11, 1948), the US Senate passed the

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Vandenberg Resolution, by which the President and the US Government were authorized to, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter (UN), in order to preserve US national security, conclude regional defense alliances with interested countries. From that moment, the US initiative to create a military-political organization of capitalist states began. The negotiations were completed at the beginning of 1949 and on April 4, 1949. Ministers of Foreign Affairs of 12 countries: USA, Great Britain, Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Canada, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway and Portugal, which participated in the negotiations, signed the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington."

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is today the most powerful military-political alliance in the world. The main purpose of NATO is to provide protection of freedom and security to its members in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter. Collective defense, the transatlantic connection, the undivided security of the alliance and NATO solidarity are the key principles on which the alliance was founded in 1949.

However, the character of the alliance has changed significantly in the past seventy years. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has evolved from an organization that was focused on collective defense into an organization that creates partnerships and participates in crisis management operations to be able to respond to new security challenges and contemporary threats, such as terrorism, mass weapons smuggling destruction, cyber attacks, etc. NATO member countries come from the most advanced parts of the world, and the fact that the members of the alliance jointly contribute 45 percent of the world's GDP speaks of the power of the members. The real strength of the North Atlantic Alliance comes from the fact that NATO combines US military and economic capabilities with European political and economic power. In the development and expansion strategy of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, are the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

The basis for NATO expansion, which is a continuous, dynamic process with no deadlines or steps for completion, is Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which is also known as the Washington Treaty. According to this article, "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European country that is in a position to advance the principles of this Treaty and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty." (North Atlantic Treaty, 1949).

NATO's "open door" policy is based on Article 10 of the Washington Treaty (1949), which states that membership is open to "a European country capable of promoting the principles of this treaty and contributing to the security of the North Atlantic area". The expansion of the Alliance is a continuous and dynamic process. Since the founding of the Association in 1949, its membership has grown from 12 founding members to today's 32 members through nine rounds of expansion in 1952, 1955, 1982, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2017, 2020 and 2023. The first three rounds of enlargement – involving Greece and Turkey (1952), West Germany (1955) and Spain (1982) – took place during the Cold War, when strategic considerations were key to the fall of the Berlin Wall 1989 marked the end of the Cold War, followed by the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union (www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm#aspirant).

The reunification of Germany in 1990 brought the territory of the former East Germany into the Union. NATO expansion was the subject of lively debate in the early 1990s. Many political analysts were unsure of the benefits that enlargement would bring. Some were concerned about the possible impact on the cohesion and solidarity of the Alliance, as well

as on relations with other countries, especially Russia. In this context, the Alliance conducted a Study on the expansion of NATO in 1995. Based on the findings of the Enlargement Study, the Alliance invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to begin accession negotiations at the 1997 NATO Summit in Madrid (www.nato.int/docu/comm/1997/970708/home.htm). Those three countries became the first former members of the Warsaw Pact to join NATO in 1999. At the Washington Summit in 1999, the Membership Action Plan was launched to help other aspirant countries prepare for possible membership. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia were invited to begin accession negotiations at the 2002 NATO Summit in Prague and joined NATO in 2004. All seven countries participated in the Membership Action Plan. At the Summit in Bucharest in 2008, the Allied leaders took a number of steps related to the future expansion of the Alliance. Some of the decisions related to the countries of the Western Balkans. Allies believe that closer integration of Western Balkan countries into Euro-Atlantic institutions is key to ensuring long-term self-sustaining stability in that region, where NATO has been heavily engaged in peace support operations since the mid-1990s. Albania and Croatia joined the Alliance in 2009; Montenegro in 2017; and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020.

NATO leaders also agreed at the Bucharest Summit that Georgia and Ukraine, which were already involved in the Intensive Dialogues with NATO, would one day become members. In May 2022, Finland and Sweden expressed their intention to join NATO and jointly submitted their official letters of application to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. This followed Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine (which began in February 2022), a move that disrupted peace in Europe and disrupted the rules of the international order.

After participating in the NATO Summit in Madrid (2022), Finland and Sweden concluded accession negotiations at NATO headquarters in Brussels on July 4, confirming their willingness and ability to fulfill the political, legal and military obligations and tasks of NATO membership. On July 5, the Allies signed the Accession Protocols for Finland and Sweden. Following the ratification of Finland's Accession Protocol by all Allied countries, the country was formally invited to accede to the Washington Treaty and joined the Alliance on April 4, 2023, and Sweden on March 7, 2024.

The alliance conducted a study on NATO enlargement, the task of which was to answer the "why" and "how" of future NATO acceding countries. The results of the study were shared with interested partner countries, and then made public. On the question of "why" regarding the expansion of NATO, the Study showed that with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact Organization, there was a simultaneous need to build and a unique opportunity to build even greater security in the entire Euro-Atlantic area without creating new lines of division. The study further showed that the expansion of NATO would contribute to increasing the stability and security of all countries of the Euro-Atlantic area, by encouraging and supporting democratic reforms, including the establishment of civilian and democratic control of the armed forces, by encouraging the forms and habits of mutual cooperation, consultations and building consensus as characteristics of member relations. of the Alliance, and by promoting good neighborly relations. According to the Study, the expansion would also increase transparency in defense planning and military budgeting, which would also strengthen trust between countries and the general tendency towards closer integration and cooperation in Europe. The study also concluded that expanding the

Alliance would strengthen its ability to contribute to European and international security (www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2006/hb-cr-2006/part6.pdf 19.11.2023).

The countries of Western Balkans and the Expansion of NATO

Albania, together with Croatia, was accepted into the NATO alliance in 2009, when it seemed that the process of expansion to the other countries of the Western Balkans would proceed rapidly. However, such a scenario turned out to be unfounded and unrealizable. The first next country to join the Alliance was Montenegro. On June 5, 2017, Montenegro officially became a full member of the NATO alliance, two days later, on June 7, the Montenegrin flag was raised in front of the NATO headquarters in Brussels (<https://2017-2021.state.gov/montenegro-joins-the-nato-alliance/> 19.11.2023.).

The ties between Montenegro and Russia, its main Slavic and Orthodox partner and largest investor, deteriorated after the country applied for membership in NATO. After Montenegro's accession to NATO, Russia warned that country about its "hostile direction" and condemned the "anti-Russian hysteria" in Montenegro (<https://www.aktuelno.me/istaknuto/bbc-crna-gora-i-nato-godina-prva/> 19.11.2023.). The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Montenegro "has full responsibility" after joining the EU sanctions against Russia in 2014.

"In light of the hostile direction chosen by the Montenegrin authorities, the Russian side reserves the right to take retaliatory measures on a reciprocal basis. In politics as well as in physics, there is a reaction for every action", the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on 6 May 2017 (https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1547899/ 19.11.2023).

The survey on citizens' perception, which was published at the end of March as part of the annual NATO report (www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/3/pdf/230320-annual_tracker_report.pdf), showed that almost half of the citizens of Montenegro would, 48 percent of them voted in the referendum for the country to remain in the NATO alliance. The survey, which was conducted in all 30 NATO members, as well as in Sweden and Finland, showed that 32 percent of Montenegrin citizens would vote in a referendum for the country to leave NATO, while 21 percent do not know how they would vote. The figures show that compared to last year, the number of those who support remaining in the Alliance has decreased, from 50 to 48, and the number of those who are in favor of leaving the Alliance has increased - from 24 to 32 percent. There was also a drop in support in other countries after the accession and that this is not something that should disturb the representatives of the authorities. The prevailing view is that for a small country like Montenegro, membership in the NATO alliance represents a strong international mechanism that guarantees stability in times of geopolitical turbulence and security challenges in Europe and our region.

After years of blockade by neighboring Greece, North Macedonia began the process of joining NATO in the second half of 2018 after receiving an invitation to become a member of the most powerful military-political alliance in the world on July 12 of that year at the Alliance summit in Brussels. This happened after Skopje and Athens reached an agreement in the dispute over the name of the state, i.e. after the name was changed from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to North Macedonia. On the last stage of the process and after reception, two things were indicative. First, at the end of 2019, the US Senate with 91 votes in favor and two against voted convincingly for the ratification of North Macedonia's

admission to NATO, which is an indicator of the special importance of this issue for the USA. Second, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned at a meeting of Russian military leaders in Sochi that "NATO expansion is a threat to Russia." (www.reuters.com/article/world/putin-criticizes-nato-expansion-as-alliance-holds-london-summit-idUSKBN1Y71K5/ accessed on 23.11.2023.).

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained the threat in a press release: "Forcibly dragging Macedonia into NATO only confirms that the "open door" policy has become an instrument for gaining control over geopolitical territory." On the same day when the Macedonian flag was raised in front of the headquarters of the Alliance in Brussels, the spokeswoman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Marija Zakharova, stated that "Russia does not understand what kind of threat NATO is protecting Macedonia from" (<https://en.vijesti.me/world/balkan/101279/Zahar%27s-goal-of-the-West-was-to-quickly-bring-Macedonia-into-NATO-through-bribery-and-blackmail> 22.11.2023). By the way, a frequent Russian argument against the expansion of NATO is "the absence of a threat from Moscow after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991", as Vladimir Putin told Reuters (www.reuters.com/article/world/putin-criticizes-nato-expansion-as-alliance-holds-london-summit-idUSKBN1Y71K5/ accessed on). NATO, on the other hand, advocates a completely different argumentation of the policy of enlargement and relations between its members. "North Macedonia's membership in NATO is a matter for North Macedonia and the Alliance. No third party can interfere. Every nation has the right to decide its own future – and freely choose its own political and security arrangements with other nations and organizations. It is a fundamental principle of European security that we all signed in the Helsinki Final Act, including Russia," said NATO media officer Daniele Riggio ([balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2020/4/3/sjeverna-makedonija-u-nato-u-rusija-spala-na-srbiju-i-entitet-rs](http://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2020/4/3/sjeverna-makedonija-u-nato-u-rusija-spala-na-srbiju-i-entitet-rs) 22.11.2023).

In a political and symbolic sense, the inclusion of the 30th member in NATO is a new painful defeat for Moscow, as is every territorial expansion of the Alliance so far. Territorialization of influence is also very important for Moscow, and Macedonia can be considered *a lost battle*.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO

The joining of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO provides guarantees for the security and stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this statement is based on Article 5 of the so-called of the Washington Treaty (1949), which, paraphrased, states that an armed attack on one or more members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will be considered an attack on all of them. It is also common knowledge that members of the NATO alliance have never gone to war with each other. Why it is at all useful for Bosnia and Herzegovina to become a member of this alliance, are the reasons of security and stability that NATO provides, i.e. membership provides a reliable guarantee that member countries will come to each other's aid in the event of an armed attack on one of them. Also, membership in NATO provides an advantage in terms of economic progress, because membership in the alliance provides stability and security, which contributes to the attraction of capital and foreign investments, and which represents great advantages for BiH and the Western Balkans region.

Prior to Russia's armed intervention in 2022, a geopolitical approach to enlargement attempted to frame every decision regarding NATO enlargement from a balance of power

and strategic understanding perspective. In other words, such an approach suggested a careful evaluation of how any accession to NATO (a) strengthens the Alliance in geostrategic and military terms, (b) provides flexibility in the relationship with Russia without creating unnecessary security dilemmas, and (c) increases the political stability of the European continent. Viewing the Balkans as a black hole in NATO's south, Wolff (2015:1104) argues that NATO enlargement and previous EU and NATO investments in Balkan reform are elements that prevent the West from allowing Russia to drag the region into its zone of interest.

After the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, we became witnesses of a new world order, but also of a new security architecture in Europe and globally. It is obvious that conventional security threats are supplemented by hybrid ones, and that there is no possibility for any country to stand up to such challenges independently. Precisely in this, the importance of the NATO alliance as a collective response to the mentioned challenges and threats was highlighted again, this time perhaps more clearly than ever before.

It was pointed out the necessity of action and creation of a joint protective, defense alliance of states and organizations that are able to guarantee collective defense as well as individual security. There is no doubt that NATO, during its more than seven decades of existence, has confirmed itself as the most relevant security alliance in the world. It is obvious that events in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially those concerning Euro-Atlantic integration, are significantly dependent on regional and even global events. The same, among other things, are to a significant extent the consequence of the competition of global powers in defining the spheres of their influence, including the creation of a new world order.

In such circumstances, especially if the complex security-political environment is taken into account, small states like BiH, which shares the fate of all the countries of the Western Balkans, impose themselves as a rational solution to join alliances, in order to more adequately confront modern security challenges.

Therefore, the expected accession to NATO was defined as one of the strategic foreign policy priorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The joining of BiH as well as other countries of the Western Balkans to NATO is a key element in achieving military security, because the entire Alliance in that case guarantees national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The most obvious advantage of joining NATO is the increased security and stability of the country as a member. However, the issue of security and stability should not exclude economic issues, which are directly or indirectly related to this membership, from the plan.

The BiH accepts the concept of collective security without any restrictions, as the most important pillar of its own military strategy. On the basis of such determination, it strives for membership in the NATO and other security alliances as soon as possible, as a basis for the connection and selection of strategic bilateral partners (White Book of Defense of BiH, 2005: 14). The BiH understand and accepts the concept of collective military security as the cornerstone of a long-term military strategy. The key element for realizing the unquestionable collective military security of BiH is to become a member of NATO, because in that case, its national sovereignty and territorial integrity are guaranteed by the entire Alliance (White Book on Defense of BiH, 2005: 15). The White Book of Defense states that thanks to past cooperation with NATO, as well as bilateral cooperation with many members of the Alliance, BiH already has substantial relations and visible results in numerous areas, such as the already achieved steps in transparency in planning of defense, in budget planning and distribution, and democratic control over the armed forces. It is concluded that BiH,

aware of its potential and possibilities, wants to achieve cooperation with NATO, as a priority in areas that will enable the adoption of command and control standards, communication and information systems, budget planning and distribution, resource management, training and equipment, and which will ensure internal and external interoperability, and thus a greater operational capability for carrying out the mission of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially the mission of peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.

In 2003, the Presidency of BiH adopted the document "General directions and priorities for the implementation of BiH's foreign policy", which characterized the approach to the European Union and NATO as the strategic goals of our country. Continuity of commitment on the way to NATO is reflected in the document "Foreign Policy Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2023." it was stated that "Continuation of activities in relation to NATO remains a priority of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (www.predsjednistvobih.ba/vanj/default.aspx?id=79555&langTag=bs-BA 17.11.2023). It is added that the priority activities will primarily be directed towards the activation and implementation of the MAP, for which there is a broad political consensus in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which enables all defense entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to continue with the implementation of activities in relation to NATO, which have been established Law on Defense of BiH.

The defense reform carried out under strong political pressure from the American administration, i.e. diplomacy, was successfully completed despite the resistance of state and social structures within BiH. The causes of these resistances can be attributed to the structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. the constitutional and political system in which no consensus has been built on the key, or strategic directions of Bosnia and Herzegovina's movement, where NATO integration has become one of the glaring examples of diametrically opposed policies (Bajramović, 2022: 213-214).

The internal political and social situation in BiH today is to a large extent an obstacle to the international cooperation of BiH "... considering its constitutional and legal state solutions, internal structure, dysfunctionality and non-existence of a number of the most important institutions for the needs of interstate and international cooperation" (Kapetanović and Latinović, 2005: 63). However, the contribution to the establishment of the security and defense structures of BiH was contributed to the greatest extent by NATO, because above all, with its mission on the ground, it created the conditions for a stable and peaceful environment.

The NATO contributed a lot to the establishment of the security and defense system of BiH, as a fundamental guarantee of the functioning of the independent state. NATO military and civilian experts provide assistance to the state authorities of BiH in the field of planning defense needs, as well as in establishing and maintaining the functioning of numerically smaller and professional armed forces, capable of adequately responding to the challenges and threats of preserving security, and participating in military missions around the world (Lisica and Bajramović, 2021:213).

Joining, that is, the process of joining BiH to NATO takes place simultaneously with the process of building the state, i.e. within the framework of post-war and post-conflict transition and stabilization of peace as in the Dayton Peace Agreement. The NATO headquarters in Sarajevo, as a stabilizing part of the country's security environment, played a very important role in providing assistance during the defense reform in BiH. Taking this into account, BiH's relationship with NATO, and NATO's relationship with BiH, all of this

constitutes a cause-and-effect relationship (jfcnaples.nato.int/hqsarajevo/nhqs-mission accessed on 25.11.2023.).

Intensified cooperation enabled BiH to participate in NATO activities, exercises, training, seminars, peace support missions, etc. BiH became a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 2006, and in the same year participated in NATO operations for the first time, sending a unit of the Armed Forces of BiH for demining and unexploded ordnance to the NATO mission in Iraq. Cooperation with NATO intensified in 2007, when BiH began participating in the partnership program, and then from 2008 in the comprehensive program of cooperation with NATO - Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP).

The BiH's commitment to NATO integration was also confirmed by the decision of the Presidency of BiH from 2009, based on which the then Chairman Nebojša Radmanović sent a letter requesting the participation of BiH in the Action Plan for Membership (MAP), that is, it concludes that "the Presidency of BiH considers that it is necessary to before submitting an application for participation in MAP" (<http://www.predsjednistvobih.ba/Print.aspx?id=34666> 21.11.2023). A year later, at the meeting of foreign ministers of NATO member countries in Tallinn, BiH was invited to the MAP, the activation of which is conditioned by the registration of immovable prospective military assets with the Ministry of Defense of BiH. In addition, Article 84 of the Law on the Defense of BiH states that: "The Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Presidency, and all subjects of defense, within their own constitutional and legal jurisdiction, will carry out the necessary activities for the admission of Bosnia and Herzegovina into NATO membership" (Law on Defense of BiH, Official Gazette of BiH, 88/05)

After that, it gradually subsided, until today the support of the representatives of the leading parties of the Republika Srpska entity would turn into open opposition to the full membership of BiH in the NATO alliance. The BiH never fulfilled the Tallinn condition, primarily due to blockades from the Republika Srpska entity, which were justified by the effort to simultaneously resolve the issue of state property (Atlantska inicijativa, 2014: 3-5).

In the following years, the activation of the MAP was attempted by presenting the achieved progress in other areas, especially the defense and interoperability of the Armed Forces of BiH. At the end of 2018, NATO invited BiH to submit the first annual national program (ANP), which was accepted by NATO in 2020, which practically activated the BiH Membership Action Plan (MAP). This was followed by blockages in the process of reporting on the reform program, as well as the insistence of representatives of the Republika Srpska entity on cooperation, but not on the process of further integration of BiH into the NATO alliance.

The position of the United States of America towards Serbia's accession to NATO and the EU is clear - the West is the "right way" for Serbia, this is the message conveyed by the US Ambassador to Belgrade, Christopher Hill, in a statement for "Politika" on May 22, 2022, ahead of the meeting with the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and emphasized: "You have to decide whether you want to have a self-sufficient army, to buy weapons from different countries or to join the collective defense. Serbs should decide that, and I think they have decided that their future is in the West, not in some undefined East".

On the other hand, the NATO alliance keeps its doors open for the rest of the countries of the Western Balkans, and it confirms this at all meetings of ministers of NATO members. This was also confirmed at the Alliance Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, (2023) where

the commitment to the stability of the Western Balkans and the territorial integrity of BiH was made clear, and it was assessed that strengthening relations with Serbia would be of mutual benefit (www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm accessed on 15.12.2023).

According to the announcement from the Summit, the region of the Western Balkans is of strategic importance for NATO, which can be seen from the long history of cooperation and operations. NATO leaders stated that they support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a stable and secure BiH, in accordance with the Dayton Peace Agreement and other relevant international agreements. The leaders encouraged BiH to take advantage of NATO's support and intensify efforts to make progress on reforms in key areas, including much-needed political, electoral, rule of law, economic and defense reforms, without prejudice to the final decision on NATO membership. The document drew attention to Serbia as well, stressing that strengthening NATO-Serbia relations would benefit the Alliance, Serbia, and the entire region.

At the meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of the NATO members, which was held in Brussels in November 2023, the situation in the Western Balkans, where there are "malignant attempts to sow discord, including from Russia", was discussed again on Monday, General NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg. "We will also discuss the situation in the Western Balkans, where we see secessionist rhetoric that brings discord in Bosnia and Herzegovina and malignant attempts to sow discord, including from Russia," Stoltenberg said at a press conference ahead of the two-day meeting in Brussels. He added that the ministers will talk with the EU's high representative for foreign and security policy, Josep Borrell, about how to strengthen stability in the region. Stoltenberg concluded that: "You can be sure that NATO will do what is necessary to ensure stability in that area, because it is important, not only for the Western Balkans, but also for the whole of Europe, and for NATO", recalling how NATO's presence is reflected in cooperation with EUFOR in BiH and KFOR in Kosovo (www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_220650.htm accessed on 15.12.2023.).

Formally, Serbia and the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska remained in the Balkans as areas of almost undisturbed influence. The very fact that Russia has "fallen" on these two allies increases the risk to the stability of the region and signals the possibility of aggressive action by Moscow in order to preserve its influence in the remaining area without NATO jurisdiction.

The fact that BiH is already surrounded by NATO members on one side is used as an argument that regardless of the final decision of these two countries, the area of the Western Balkans is definitely on the side of the West and the NATO alliance. On the other hand, there is also an argument that non-adherence to NATO opens up opportunities for instability under the influence of the Russian Federation, which uses precisely the areas of instability which is traditionally porous and prone to conflicts, for political trade on the global level.

It is very important to democratically involve the wider BiH's public in a high-quality discussion about joining the NATO, as well as looking at objective economic indicators, which will ultimately enable politicians to make their decisions in the best interest of the citizens. It is necessary for as many citizens of BiH as possible to receive information about NATO, about the organization itself, its principles and purpose, about NATO's activities in BiH, about the advantages of full membership... People need to be given information about the role of NATO on the territory of BiH and our region, about what that membership brings to this country, as well as how much that membership costs, and not only financially. Joining the NATO brings

the need to start discussions about the possible outcomes of such an important political decision. We have witnessed that in the previous public discussions on the accession of BiH as a Western Balkan country to NATO, special attention was paid to security and political issues, while economic issues were sporadically or almost never discussed professionally.

Conclusion

The NATO comprised of 32 member states from North America and Europe, represents the largest military and political alliance of today. Collective defense, transatlantic ties, undivided security of the alliance, and NATO solidarity have been and remain key principles upon which the alliance was founded in 1949. The real strength of the alliance stems from the combination of the military and economic capabilities of the United States with the political and economic strength of Europe. In addition to being the most powerful military-political alliance, NATO is an economic alliance based on market principles.

Membership in NATO is widely accepted as a guarantee of security, but it has been a subject of political conflict in BiH for an extended period, as well as in other countries in the region. Currently, all Western Balkan countries (Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro) except Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Serbia are full members of NATO. Bosnia and Herzegovina initially had unanimous support for full NATO membership after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, but over time, this support weakened and transformed into open opposition from representatives of the Republika Srpska entity.

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, which began in February 2022 and continues, has directly influenced the decisions of traditionally neutral countries outside NATO membership. This is evident in the cases of Finland and Sweden, which applied for NATO membership immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Finland became a full member of NATO in April 2023, and Sweden in 7 march 2024. Ukraine also applied for membership, but support for integration was lacking, citing a low level of fulfillment of membership prerequisites. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has rekindled concerns about the security of the Western Balkans and the significant influence that the Russian Federation has in parts of this region. However, this has not affected the stance of the Republic of Serbia on military neutrality or the representatives of the Republika Srpska entity in BiH, missing an opportunity for the accelerated integration of these two states into NATO, thereby placing the entire Western Balkans under NATO protection.

Full membership of BiH in NATO would be an additional guarantee of security and stability, providing the right to collective defense under NATO auspices. This would significantly impact the general perception of instability and insecurity due to continuous threats to secession and the violation of the sovereignty and integrity of BiH by representatives of the Republika Srpska entity, with support from neighboring Serbia.

The lack of a pragmatic and thorough assessment of the interests of joining NATO, considering regional and global developments, and the fact that there is a new reordering of the fragmented order in which military-political neutrality loses its meaning, further complicates the integration process. The division of public opinion is not the result of an objective expert analysis but rather based on the clash of mythologies and political ideologies, overshadowing real global threats to the stability of the region and Europe, as well as the fundamental values of democracy and the European Union.

Scientific research on the impact of NATO membership is not only of scientific interest but also of social interest. Objectivizing this topic, based on expert analyses and research on NATO integration aspects and the alliance's impact on security and collective defense in the 21st century, is crucial for a better understanding of the importance of NATO membership and the creation of stability policies in the BiH and region. It is expected that the results of this scientific research will contribute to the quality of public debate and a better understanding of the accession process, or the privileges of NATO membership.

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