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Kosovo's foreign policy and NATO membership: opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

The background of this study is related to the strategic orientation of Kosovo, the Euro-Atlantic, respectively the union and integration in political, economic and military organization of North Atlantic. A research question that will be asked, and that we will try to answer in this research is: "What are the opportunities and what are the challenges that Kosovo may have until full membership in NATO?".

A challenge that still remains a concern of societies in transition, especially the Kosovar which is and traumatized in general, taking into the consideration the past of these fragile territories, after the wars in the Balkans, remains the main challenge of creating the public institutions, capacities within institutions, making an important contribution to the best possible advancement within the democratic system of government, to its role in the good in general and to the security sector in all its dimensions, in particular to fulfill this mission.

Kosovo non-governmental and governmental institutions have worked to initiate cooperation and integration with NATO, trying to establish official communication between Kosovo institutions and NATO, to start the process of Kosovo's integration into the Alliance. Already, Kosovo has begun to participate in humanitarian missions in various countries around the world, invited by NATO itself. Kosovo was also part of the exercise, "Defender Europe - 2021", invited specially by the United States.

The methodology used in this research is mainly related to the descriptive but also analytical method, the current factual situation, and what awaits us as a country in the future towards NATO.

The data obtained from official institutions, whether those of Kosovo or NATO, but also scientific research, will serve us to analyze and reach final conclusions or findings. Normally, these findings will give us an answer to the question posed above.

Key words: foreign policy, integration, Kosovo, NATO, opportunities, challenges.

Introduction

The beginning of NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia, and the liberation of Kosovo in 1999 marks the period when cooperation between Kosovo and NATO began. This cooperation is already marking more than 22 years, and is continuing between Kosovo and NATO, although now in other more advanced circumstances and phases. Initially, we had NATO cooperation with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) immediately after the end of the war in Kosovo, where the process of demilitarization of the KLA began, and the transformation into the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), a process that ended in 2000. With the Ahtisaari Pact it was envisaged the dissolution of KPC and creation of a new force, following Kosovo's declaration of independence.

The Kosovo Security Force (KSF) was established in early 2009, which was originally intended to deal with civil emergency aspects of natural disasters. After a long transition, at the end of 2018, after the blessing from the USA, through the voting of three laws in the Assembly of Kosovo, the KSF changes its mandate and thus it returns with a military mission, into a regular army.

The above reflection shows the chronology of the development and transformation of today's KSF. Normally, every development and transformation has taken place in close cooperation with the international community, especially with the USA, more specifically, in full coordination with NATO.

In 2013, the KSF received the green light from NATO to complete its operational capabilities, and in this way the KSF is shown to be capable of performing its tasks in full. This came as evidence, after sending a KSF contingent to Shkodra in 2010, during a period of flooding there. Operational peacekeeping advancements are marked in 2021, when the KSF

conducts its first peacekeeping mission in Kuwait. The KSF as a young and professional army, also in 2021 participated in the military exercise "Defender Europe 2021", where it was among many NATO member states, which as a military exercise, was planned to take place in some countries including Kosovo, and containing within itself (military training operations) around 28,000 military troops.

Today, KSF together with NALT - NATO Liaison Advisory Team within the KSF, are performing all operational tasks of standardization, fulfillment of objectives, purchase of military equipment, specifically completing the skills to be a partner of world peace armies, and in step with its strategic mission towards NATO membership.

The epilogue of foreign policy

Since the declaration of independence and the establishment of institutions, Kosovo has operated without a proper foreign policy strategy. In the early years, in addition to Euro-Atlantic integration, one of the key priorities has been membership in international organizations and international recognition, with a particular focus on the five EU countries (Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). After the year 2012, the dialogue with Serbia was added to the list of priorities when the Kosovo-Serbia talks facilitated by the EU officially started.

Foreign Service, has been serving the narrow interests of their respective governments to a large extent which have greatly politicized the foreign diplomatic service, nepotism and accelerated promotions without respecting legal provisions.

As a result, the 50% quota for career diplomats has been consistently violated. However, even though Kosovo did not have any strategy, membership in international organizations and the number of recognitions came as a result of international support (Xhambazi, 2020).

Kosovo's foreign policy should develop and use more the public diplomacy as main tool at its disposal, considering that we do not have the opportunity to influence other countries through the military or economic aspect. Kosovo has cultural and sports assets which we could use in a positive way as a new state, and through these assets to achieve the influence in 5 EU countries that have not recognized us, but also to slightly adjust the image of the country around the world (For more see: Brovina, Arifi, & Nuhiu, 2020). Therefore, within the topic, NATO itself as a military organization invests a lot in the field of public diplomacy, for this reason as we mentioned above Kosovo's foreign policy should develop this field (NATO, 2016).

Kosovo's foreign policy in terms of security aspects, seems to have failed to function with effective mechanisms in promoting security, and providing Public Diplomacy platforms in the field of communication with non-recognizing countries of Kosovo, which would also constitute the completion of five non-recognizing countries for Kosovo, consequently, would also facilitate membership in international security and political organizations.

Opportunities for NATO membership: political process of international cooperation

Kosovo's membership in Euro-Atlantic structures with special emphasis on NATO, became a priority for Kosovo institutions in year 2014, when the Strategic Security Sector Review was completed. The political discourse in Kosovo has consistently referred to the country's membership in Euro-Atlantic structures, including NATO (Avdiu, 2015).

Since the adoption of three laws to transform the KSF, from an emergency intervention force to a military force, Kosovo's membership in NATO is now emphasized to be among the top priorities in the field of defense and security. Kosovo institutions say that the aspiration for membership in the NATO will continue to be treated with the utmost seriousness. Kosovo Government officials emphasize that cooperation, transparency and coordination with NATO mechanisms in Kosovo, continuously helps to achieve and strengthen democratic standards. Kosovo's aspirations to join NATO are enshrined in all national strategic documents and security sector legislation. The vision for NATO membership is clearly mentioned in almost every document, in addition to EU integration. In this context, political discourse treats Euro-Atlantic integration as one of the main goals in the medium and long term (Vranjolli & Kallaba, 2012).

NATO also has the Membership Action Plan. This plan helps members who aspire to prepare for membership and that meet key requirements by providing them with practical advice and related assistance (Konushevci, 2019). Regarding the possibilities of Kosovo's membership in NATO, according to the Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS), two scenarios are

envisaged. The first scenario includes the part from the Kosovo-NATO dialogue to Kosovo's full membership in this organization. This scenario is divided into two phases (Avdiu, 2015):

1. The first phase involves the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which must or is obliged to submit the Presentation Document for Kosovo to NATO.
 - After the submission of this document, the opening of the official Kosovo-NATO dialogue is expected, according to which it is expected to ensure:
 - Assessment of the KFOR mission;
 - Development of full capacities of the Kosovo Armed Forces which would lead to full assumption of responsibilities by the KFOR mission, and thus would continue to ensure a peaceful and secure environment in the country;
 - It would be ensured that the demarcation of the border with Serbia is done with the mediation of the EU and NATO
 - Then in first phase, NATO would have to decide on two issues, which are:
 - Merger of the NATO Liaison and Advisory Team to the NATO Liaison Office in Kosovo which would support the Kosovo Armed Forces and which would prepare Kosovo for full NATO membership;
 - Appointment of the NATO Special Representative in Kosovo who would represent NATO and coordinate the dialogue between Kosovo and NATO.

2. After the successful completion of the first phase, it would move to the second phase, which would aim to reach a bilateral agreement between Kosovo and NATO.

- After the end of the dialogue mentioned in the first phase, the agreement aimed at reaching at the second phase would provide:
 - Establishing contractual relations between Kosovo and NATO;
 - Opening the process of full membership in NATO;
 - NATO to pave the way for Kosovo to join the Partnership for Peace and then NATO;
 - Countries that have not recognized Kosovo's independence will not block Kosovo's membership in NATO;
 - Participation of the Kosovo Armed Forces in NATO international operations and missions.

The second scenario involves bilateral cooperation with NATO countries. Initially, it is envisaged to strengthen and increase cooperation with NATO member countries. This is intended to be done in several forms, such as (Avdiu, 2015):

- The Government of Kosovo should reach as many bilateral agreements as possible with NATO member countries;
- The Government of Kosovo should reach agreements with Albania and Croatia, in order to benefit from these two countries as examples for integration in the Partnership for Peace and NATO;
- The Government of Kosovo should review and analyze the plan for NATO membership of Montenegro and Northern Macedonia;

- Through strengthening cooperation with NATO countries, and reaching agreements with these countries, the focus should be on training programs and joint exercises of the Kosovo Armed Forces with the armed forces of the respective NATO countries;
- Also, Kosovo friendly countries can help in building of capacities of the Kosovo Armed Forces, according to the standards required by NATO;
- After that, the next path that Kosovar institutions should follow is to start implementing the conditions required by NATO for membership. This brings benefits to Kosovo because when the time comes to submit a formal application for membership in the Partnership for Peace and NATO, we are already ready;
- The implementation of these conditions can be monitored and assisted in the implementation by the friendly states of Kosovo.

Following the strengthening of cooperation with NATO member states, diplomatic efforts should be continued, which can be developed in the following directions:

1. The Government of Kosovo should as soon as possible increase the number of military attachés in friendly countries of Kosovo;
2. There should be an increase in Kosovo's diplomatic staff in NATO countries;
3. Kosovo embassies, in close cooperation with NATO countries, should aim to influence countries that have not recognized us, which are NATO member states, to soften their attitudes towards Kosovo's independence.

Strategic partnership in the Euro-Atlantic integration process and its challenges

In the framework of these strategic reports, the EU and NATO have agreed on a coordinated approach to security and stability in the Western Balkans. The EU-NATO partnership has played a key role in ending the conflict and stabilizing the region (NATO, 2008).

Figure 1

Western Balkans and relations with NATO



Source: (Kruijver & Xhambazi, 2020)

One of the most important aspects in the process of NATO membership is the aspect of economic development of the aspiring countries, namely the budget increases of the Western Balkan countries.

The budget destinations of the Balkan countries for their armies are as follows: Albania - 157 million euros (NATO member country), Northern Macedonia - 110 million euros (NATO member country), Kosovo - 53 million euros, Montenegro - 71 million euros (NATO member country), Serbia - 590 million euros, BiH - 145 million euros (Emini, 2019). The budget foreseen

for the KSF from 2021 until 2028, is supposed to have almost doubled the budget. In 2021, 66 million euros are foreseen, 2022-76 million euros, 2023-83 million euros, 2024-87 million euros, 2025-101 million euros, 2026-109 million euros, 2027-110 million euros, and 2028-110 million euro. As for the staff, the KSF will have no more than 5000 active members and 3000 reserve members (Emini, 2019).

The US House of Representatives, through the preparation of the 2015 Budget Law, has requested, from the US administration, to work closely with the institutions of Kosovo, to prepare for inclusion in the NATO Partnership for Peace program (KosovaPress, 2014).

Also, the American Center for Regional Studies "Wilson Center" has published a report for Kosovo, entitled "Consolidation of Kosovo Independence: Why it matters and what to do." In this report, the US Center recommends that Kosovo's international partners (US and EU) should renew their commitment to consolidating Kosovo's sovereignty, including facilitating the transformation of the KSF into a fully operational army by 2027 (Express, 2021).

Our partnership as Kosovo built between the US and NATO over two decades, as well as the special military link with the State of Iowa, has marked many achievements in the field of specialized training, and high military visits. As a result of this strategic partnership, the state of Kosovo, respectively the KSF, marked the first peacekeeping mission in Kuwait, taking an active role in global security alongside the armies of peace.

In conclusion, this specific partnership between the KSF, the US and NATO is a result of the advancement, strengthening of this mission, and the strategic partnership between NATO allies as a proof that Kosovo should become a member as soon as possible in NATO

Conclusions

One of the strategic goals of Kosovo, without a doubt, is accession and membership in NATO political and military structures. In the framework of this strategic objective, Kosovo also established its own army through laws, as an impossibility of a change of the Constitution due to the specifics with the Serb minority.

In this research, it is tried to argue that the Strategic Defense and Security Partnership with allied countries, has made Kosovo with a solid physical military presence of NATO in the territory of Kosovo, through the Kosovo Force (KFOR) to mark the increase of credibility and advancement of these strategic relations on the path of Kosovo to NATO.

This study has shown the vital importance of Kosovo to ensure statehood, inviolability and the preservation of its sovereignty towards membership as soon as possible in NATO and other political and security organizations in Europe and the World. The path to be followed, towards this objective, the steps that have been taken are evaluated in addition to the dynamism of resources to achieve the operational and functional fulfillment of the military capacities, being ranked as a reliable partner for the strategic allies.

Kosovo's clear Euro-Atlantic perspective between challenges and opportunities is also a path that must be overcome in close cooperation with the US and NATO, towards the day when Kosovo will officially mark the last hour of pre-accession and the flag of the Republic of Kosovo to rise and wave next to the flags of NATO armies in Brussels.

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