
Montenegro and NATO: the likelihood of accession and its repercussions



Michael Drewett, Junior Researcher, North America Programme
michael.drewett@cgsrs.org

Centre for Geopolitics & Security in Realism Studies
20-22 Wenlock Road, London N1 7GU, United Kingdom
www.cgsrs.org / info@cgsrs.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Montenegro is expected to join NATO before the end of 2016. Its membership would improve the stability of the region, ensure NATO control over the Adriatic sea, and serve as a precursor to EU membership. There is a narrow majority in favour of membership within the country, and the move would be supported across the region. However, Montenegro will have to overcome domestic opposition and Russian pressure if it is to accede to the Alliance on schedule.

Introduction

On 2nd December 2015, NATO formally invited Montenegro to begin accession talks on becoming the twenty-ninth member of the Alliance. An invitation to begin accession negotiations is usually followed quickly by full NATO membership. Indeed, the Montenegrin Prime Minister, Milo Đukanović, has expressed his hope that the country will be able to take an 'observer seat' (i.e. awaiting ratification of the signed accession protocol) at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016. There are clear benefits to NATO membership both for Montenegro and for the rest of the Alliance, including the USA. However, there are also notable obstacles to accession, especially domestic opposition and Russian objections. These obstacles are not likely to prevent Montenegro acceding to NATO but may delay the process.

Background

Montenegro's historical relationship with NATO has been fraught. The country was one of the six constituent republics of the state of Yugoslavia until it disintegrated in the early 1990s. Serbia and Montenegro remained the two members of a reconstituted Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1999, NATO bombed the Federal Republic, including targets within

Montenegro (Morrison 2009, pg. 170), with the stated aim of ending Serbian violence in Serbia's autonomous region of Kosovo (NATO 1999). Since 1998, however, Montenegro under the leadership of Milo Đukanović has pursued a policy of distancing itself from Serbia and aligning itself with the West (Morrison 2009, pg. 2). Montenegro loosened its ties to Serbia with the 2003 creation of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006, Montenegro became an independent state following a close referendum (55.5% in favour).

The Benefits of Membership

For NATO

NATO will benefit in at least four ways from Montenegro's accession.

Firstly, Montenegro's NATO membership will reduce further the low possibility of a return to conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Montenegro would benefit from the collective defence of NATO members guaranteed under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The country would also be socialized into the foreign policy practices of the other members of NATO. According to Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General, Montenegrin accession "will further reinforce the security and stability of the Western Balkans, a region long held back by instability and conflict" (Stoltenberg 2015).

This would be a valuable gain for NATO in a region where its Kosovo Force (KFOR) peacekeeping mission, consisting of 4,600 troops, continues on the other side of the Montenegrin border in Kosovo (NATO 2015).

Secondly, membership would encourage other prospective NATO members. According to Stoltenberg, “Montenegro’s membership will demonstrate to all those who aspire to membership that if a country delivers, so does NATO. Our door remains open” (Stoltenberg 2015). Further expansion of NATO had appeared to be in doubt following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. Prior to the war the US had advocated extending NATO membership to Georgia, Ukraine, Albania and Croatia. Albania and Croatia acceded in 2009, but Georgia and Ukraine never received an invitation. This was unsurprising given that Russian troops remained present in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two regions claimed by Georgia (Dempsey 2015). It would not have been feasible for NATO to guarantee the territorial integrity of a state that did not in fact have control over its entire territory. More broadly, the Russo-Georgian War supported the case of defensive realists such as Waltz. Waltz and others argued that NATO’s post-Cold War expansion was worsening Russia’s security dilemma, creating unnecessary tension between Russia and the

West (Waltz 2000, Brown 1995). The argument that NATO’s expansion creates avoidable tension appears less credible following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine. Present Russian foreign policy would appear to indicate an offensive realist mindset, aimed at maximizing power rather than security. If so, Russia will pursue similar policies irrespective of whether NATO expands. NATO, then, can confidently expand to maximize its own power and thereby its members’ own security, so long as it does not extend security guarantees to countries it cannot defend. Montenegro would be the first country to join the Alliance since 2009, demonstrating that NATO is still willing to expand. This would increase NATO’s influence over prospective members including Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, as candidate countries can see that the prospect of membership remains credible.

Thirdly, Montenegrin membership carries its own strategic value beyond encouraging other countries seeking to join NATO. It places the Bay of Kotor, the last natural harbour in the Adriatic, under NATO control (*The Economist* 2015). Indeed, with Montenegro’s accession, NATO will control almost the entirety of the northern Mediterranean coastline from Gibraltar to the

Turkish-Syrian border. The two exceptions are Monaco and Bosnia-Herzegovina's 20km Neum corridor. Neither have strategic significance, and France defends Monaco. Montenegro's geographical position is likely to prove a greater contribution than its military capabilities. Although Stoltenberg praises Montenegro's "expertise in areas such as mountain warfare and maritime security" (Stoltenberg 2015), the country has an approximate active military strength of only 2,000 personnel, of little significance to an Alliance with a total active military strength of over 3.3 million personnel (Government of Montenegro 2015, NATO 2015).

Fourthly, NATO's present members would benefit from Montenegro's accession to the Alliance, because it would also help prepare the country for accession to the European Union (EU) (Đukanović 2015, Stoltenberg 2015). NATO's conditions for membership include reforms to promote the rule of law and to reduce corruption, aims shared by the EU. NATO's security guarantees are also an assurance that the EU is expanding into a politically stable region. Finally, the close overlap between NATO and EU membership means that the two organisations share values and interests. Membership of one should signal that a country is aligned with the values and interests of the other. Since the EU

is committed to enlargement into the Balkans, Montenegro's membership of NATO is a welcome precursor to EU membership.

For Montenegro

For Montenegro itself, the prospect of eventual EU membership is an important incentive to join NATO (Stoltenberg & Lukšić 2015). EU membership would bring with it trade in goods and services, foreign direct investment and free movement of labour, as well as the technical and practical assistance of EU institutions.

Secondly, NATO membership is highly prestigious. It would bring with it greater diplomatic influence and support offered by other members of the organisation.

Finally, Montenegro would gain NATO's security guarantee. Although armed conflict in the region is not likely, it would be unusual behaviour for any state to decline an opportunity to enhance its security without any fiscal cost.

There are strong incentives for both Montenegro and for NATO itself to arrange Montenegro's accession. There are, however, also considerable obstacles.

Obstacles to Membership

Domestic Opposition

There is significant domestic opposition to NATO membership within Montenegro. This is

unsurprising given that NATO bombed targets in the country in 1999 during its campaign against Serbia. In addition, Montenegro has historical ties to Russia. Until independence from Serbia in 2006, Montenegro used the Cyrillic alphabet. The equal treatment of the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets is now enshrined in the constitution. A substantial majority of the population (72% at the 2011 census) are Eastern Orthodox Christians, and the country has a large Serbian minority (32% at the 2011 census). In a country with historical, cultural and religious ties to both Russia and Serbia, there is some opposition to membership of NATO, a Western military alliance established partly to balance against the USSR and now Russia.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has called for a referendum to be held on NATO membership, and in December, opposition parties held anti-NATO demonstrations in Podgorica attended by thousands (*Reuters* 2015, Tomova 2016). It is not guaranteed that the government would win a referendum on NATO membership; two opinion polls in 2014 showed only very narrow majorities in favour, though support has allegedly been increasing over time (Government of Montenegro 2014). At present the Montenegrin government does not intend to hold a referendum.

The government might be expected to agree to a referendum in order to raise support. The government is contesting legislative elections in October, giving it an additional incentive to agree to a referendum. Even prior to NATO's invitation, Đukanović's government was facing protests over its treatment of demonstrators (Bošković 2015). However, an Ipsos poll conducted in December indicated that the governing coalition would currently win a sufficient share of the vote to remain in power. Indeed, it is doubtful that the country's democracy is truly competitive (Morrison 2011); the pro-European Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), the successor to the Communist Party, has been in government ever since the party was established in 1991. Having challenged Momir Bulatovic for the presidency of the party in 1997, Đukanović himself has held the offices of either prime minister or president for more than twenty-one of the past twenty-five years. (Morrison 2011, Government of Montenegro 2016). Mr. Bulatovic now leads a pro-EU, anti-NATO opposition party involved in current demonstrations (Tomovic 2015). The political dominance of Đukanović and the nationalist DPS suggests that they can afford to resist pressure for a referendum and still win the October elections. Domestic opposition alone is unlikely to delay Montenegro's accession.

Russia's Response

Russian rhetoric is hostile to Montenegrin membership of NATO. Russia has repeated domestic calls for Montenegro to hold a referendum before joining, though the proposal is likely to be disregarded. It has threatened to retaliate against Montenegro's accession. Some Russian rhetoric is simply bluff. For example, Victor Ozerlov, chair of a Russian parliamentary committee on defence, suggested that Russia would respond by ending joint military projects with Montenegro, though Russia does not at present have any such projects (*Reuters* 2015, *The Economist* 2015). This does not mean that Russian opposition is irrelevant; there is significant Russian investment in Montenegro, as well as tourism, and Russian media outlets operate in the Balkans. According to Edward P. Joseph (2015), "Russia has the tools at its disposal to influence next October's elections" through "propaganda and money". Existing domestic opposition with Russian support, then, could plausibly affect the outcome of the October elections. Đukanović has sought to allay Russian opposition by characterizing Montenegro as "a friend in NATO" and arguing that the country's accession is of limited strategic significance for Russia (*Radio Free Europe* 2015). Despite Đukanović's claims, Russia will continue to perceive Montenegrin's accession as justifying "retaliatory actions" (*BBC News* 2015). The

Montenegrin government and NATO should both remain alert about the possibility of a Russian attempt to influence the country's elections.

Serbia and the region

Serbia is not seeking NATO membership. Despite its history, however, it is unlikely to oppose Montenegro's accession to NATO. Serbia has been cooperating increasingly closely with NATO, establishing an Individual Partnership Action Plan in January 2015. In November 2015 the Serbian Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vucic, stated that improving relations with NATO was "extremely important" to the country (NATO 2015). Cooperation with NATO is useful for Serbia with respect to the ongoing migrant crisis, terrorism, and regional stability. In addition, Serbia is a candidate for accession to the EU. The principal obstacle to EU membership is Serbia's dispute over sovereignty with Kosovo (Delauney 2015). While NATO's KFOR continues to operate, good relations with NATO are crucial if Serbia is ever to become an EU member. Serbian opposition, then, will not be a problem for Montenegro's accession.

The wider region is likely to be either neutral towards, or supportive of, Montenegro joining NATO. The other states bordering Montenegro are either current NATO members (Albania and

Croatia), candidates for accession (Bosnia-Herzegovina) or the subject of a NATO peacekeeping mission (Kosovo). Montenegro faces no adverse consequences to joining from bordering states. Further afield, all the states bordering those mentioned above are also NATO members (NATO 2016), so no opposition can be expected in the wider region.

Conclusion

There are substantial benefits to be gained by both Montenegro and NATO through Montenegrin membership of NATO, especially

in terms of regional stability and possible future EU membership. Overall, accession before the end of 2016 is highly likely, especially as other countries in the region are either neutral or supportive. Polling and the historical performance of the SPS under Đukanović suggests that it will be able to resist demands for a referendum and will also be able to lead a government from October. However, the possibility of delays caused by domestic opposition and by Russian activity cannot be disregarded.

Conclusions for Policy

1. Both Montenegro and NATO should act to conclude accession negotiations as swiftly as possible, and national legislatures should prioritise ratification of the accession protocol once negotiations are complete.
2. The Montenegrin government should continue to build domestic support for membership of the Alliance. The US can assist these efforts by emphasising the defensive intentions of the Alliance.
3. The SPS under Đukanović has persistently dominated the Montenegrin party system. In considering Montenegro's future admission to the EU (which is otherwise desirable), current member states should therefore be cautious about the quality of Montenegro's democracy, as well as issues around corruption and the rule of law.

References

Bošković, Mirko 'Why Montenegro's protests are unlikely to spell the end for Milo Đukanović', LSE Blog 2015, [Web](#), 20th November 2015

Brown, Michael E., 'The Flawed Logic of NATO expansion', *Survival* 1995

Central Intelligence Agency, 'Montenegro', *CIA World Factbook*, [Web](#), accessed 9th January 2016

Delauney, Guy, 'New Momentum for Serbia and Kosovo', *BBC News* 2015, [Web](#), 26th August 2015

Dempsey, Judy, 'NATO Membership for Montenegro but Not for Georgia', *Carnegie Europe* 2015, [Web](#), 7th December 2015

Đukanović, Milo, 'Government's Open Session', [Web](#), 24th December 2015

Đukanović, Milo, 'NATO offer need not harm ties with Russia', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2015, [Web](#), 15th December 2015

Emmott, Robin, and Siebold, Sabine, 'NATO invites Montenegro to join alliance, defying Russia', *Reuters* 2015, [Web](#), 2nd December 2015

Government of Montenegro, '46% of citizens support Montenegro's accession to NATO', [Web](#), 29th March 2014

J., T., 'The End of An Era, Possibly', *The Economist* 2010, [Web](#), 21st December 2010

Joseph, Edward P., 'Montenegro's Moment: Why NATO should act fast', *Foreign Affairs* 2015, [Web](#), 15th December 2015

Kaluđerović, Nebojša (transcribed speech), 'NC Kaluđerović underlines importance of NATO membership dialogue: 42% support accession, 41% against', Government of Montenegro, [Web](#), 28th February 2014

Monstat, 2011 Monstat census data, [Web](#), accessed 9th January 2016

Montenegro Electoral Commission, Official press release on the results of the 2006 referendum, [Web](#), 31st May 2006

Morrison, Kenneth, *Montenegro: A Modern History*, I.B. Tauris 2009

Morrison, Kenneth, 'Montenegro: The Survivor Exits', *The World Today* 2011, Royal Institute of International Affairs, February 2011

NATO, 'Data Relating to NATO Defence', [Web](#), 22nd June 2015

NATO, 'NATO's Role in Kosovo', [Web](#), 30th November 2015

NATO, 'NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo', [Web](#), 15th July 1999

Osborn et al., 'Russia says Montenegro should hold referendum on joining NATO', *Reuters* 2015, [Web](#), 16th December 2015

Stoltenberg, Jens, and Lukšić, Igor, Press Conference, [Web](#), 2nd December 2015

Stoltenberg, Jens, 'NATO Welcomes Montenegro through its Open Door', NATO, [Web](#), 3rd December 2015

Tomovic, Dusica, 'Serbian Church urges Montenegro NATO Referendum', *Balkan Insight* 2016, [Web](#), 5th January 2016

Unattributed. 'Around 2,000 in Montenegro protest against joining NATO', *Associated Press* 2015, [Web](#), 12th December 2015

Unattributed. 'In the Balkans, NATO has outmuscled Russia', *The Economist* 2015, [Web](#), 11th December 2015

Unattributed. 'NATO invitation to Montenegro prompts Russia warning', *BBC News* 2015, [Web](#), 2nd December 2015

Unattributed. 'Russia urges Montenegro to hold referendum on NATO', *BBC News* 2015, [Web](#), 16th December 2015

Vucic, Aleksandar (transcribed speech), 'Cooperation with NATO in Serbia's interest', Government of Serbia, [Web](#), 20th November 2015

Waltz, Kenneth, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War', *International Security* 2000

Xuequan, Mu (Ed.), 'Montenegro to become NATO member by 2016', *Xinhua* 2015, [Web](#), 3rd December 2015