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WHERE TO? BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AT THE CROSSROADS



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Where to? Bosnia and Herzegovina at the crossroads

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BALKANS: EUROPEAN OR RUSSIAN SPHERE OF INTEREST?

Sonja Biserko

Milorad Dodik's increasingly radical behavior is not accidental. Many analysts see it as an expression of his uncertainty given the presence of a new team of American diplomats in the Balkans. However, one should also keep in mind the international context, the fact that all actors are preoccupied by their own situations. Belgrade is trying, in something of an international political vacuum, to test the possibility of implementing a state project that has never been abandoned, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

The aggressive behavior of Belgrade and the Republika Srpska would not be possible without the support of Russia, which primarily has the goal of keeping the region in a state of frozen conflict and preventing the spread of Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia's influence on the foreign policy of Serbia is growing stronger, especially when it acts as a protector of Serbs where Kosovo is concerned. Serbia is currently in the firm embrace of Russia, and until Russia achieves a comprehensive agreement with the USA on the future of the countries in the Western Balkans, it is difficult to envisage any further significant move by Serbia towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

Moscow's reaction to Admiral Robert Burke's statement that the Western Balkans is a part of Europe, and that its stability and security are of crucial importance to NATO, is highly indicative. Russian

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Marija Zakharova reacted by writing on her Telegram account that "The defense capability of Serbia... largely depends on how quickly Russia would react to external threats to this Southern Slavic country".

It is no coincidence that the political situations in Ukraine and in BiH are radicalizing at the same time. Russia has opened two fronts to the West, and both are extremely sensitive geostrategically. Bosnia is in a scissor's situation, between the blades of Belgrade and Zagreb, and the internal potential for rebellion and change, so to speak, does not exist. The Bishop of Banja Luka, Franjo Komarica, explains the absence of a civil uprising in Bosnia by saying that "the backbone of the people is broken, and they have no more strength, they were crushed by the steamroller of war and their expectations were betrayed after the war." Fear and uncertainty have fueled a new wave of emigration to Western Europe, further reducing the internal potential for a vibrant civil society.

Assessing the circumstances to be in its favour, Moscow posed an ultimatum to the United States, asking for "legal security guarantees from the United States and NATO" without delay. Otherwise, says Moscow, the West will face a "military and technical alternative". Russian blackmail is explicit in this instance and is aimed at both Americans and Europeans. Russia is seeking a written and legally binding promise that Ukraine and Georgia will not be admitted to NATO, and that NATO will reduce its military activity in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states.

Russia believes that if NATO agrees to these concessions, the United States would be reduced to a regional power. Russia's position is that "the perspective of the agreement depends only on the relations between Russia and the United States", because only the Americans control the flight of their bombers near the Russian borders and can also deploy US missile systems on Ukrainian territory. European countries do not have weapons that could threaten Russia and are not independent in deploying those weapons on its territory, so Moscow considers them irrelevant.

Russia has been preparing to return to the global scene for almost two decades. Putin's statement that "the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" is significant. In 2007, by presidential decree, Putin formed the "Russian World" fund and imbued it with the task of protecting national values, above all the Russian language, Russian Orthodoxy and Russian historical memory. This foundation is also active in Serbia and Vladimir Tolstoy, President Putin's adviser, commented during a recent visit to Serbia about the foundation and the concept of the "Russian world": "Today, in a changing world where values fluctuate and boundaries are shifting, the Russian world is trying to preserve key global traditional values. All those who share these principles, who consider them important, are part of the great Russian world."

In a piece he wrote last year, Putin claimed that "Ukraine and Russia are essentially part of the same historical and spiritual space," and that "together they have always been and will be much stronger and more successful. Because we are one nation. " Moscow's stance is also linked to its sense that the United States is going through a serious social and political crisis, and that this is the right time to push for the transformation to a global system in which Russia, China and other powers will perform greater hegemonic functions. Russia has gained the support of Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Poland in that regard, but also of many radical left and right groups within Western European democracies. We should not forget Putin's close relationship with former US President Donald Trump, who has been pivotal in encouraging such trends in the US itself. They all challenge the universality of the Western model and in that sense Western authority, when it comes to political norms and values.

America has been a key international player in the Balkans and is still perceived as such today. The EU's prevarications around enlargement have weakened its mobilizing potential for the last ten years. Despite the billions the EU has invested in the Western Balkans, there has been little or no societal progress in the past 26 years for BiH citizens, bringing about a situation in which young people are increasingly emigrating to EU countries.

Belgrade skilfully uses and manipulates the contradictions of strategic Western influence within the Balkans. The toxicity inherent in aspects of the public sphere and the tensions created by the Serbian media create the impression that a new conflict is possible. Bosniaks are particularly targeted because they are continuously portrayed through the prism of an "Islamic threat" (in which Belgrade and the RS authorities also have the support of right-wing Western political circles), in connection with justifying Dodik's floated secessionist policies.

Although voices that represent domestic civil society and the views of a burgeoning intellectual elite oppose such aspirations there are, unfortunately, politically stronger and more organized forces in Serbia that advocate the disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Republika Srpska and Serbia have goals that are clearly defined in government documents, such as the 'Strategy for Preservation and Strengthening Relations between homeland and diaspora and homeland and Serbs in the Region' (2011) and the 'Charter on Serbian Cultural Space'. Both documents advocate the systematic integration of the Republika Srpska into the "Serbian world" - economically, spiritually, culturally and in terms of the dissemination of information. "Political unification has begun and it is unstoppable," announced the Minister of Police, Aleksandar Vulin.

The Western Balkans is a declared sphere of interest for 'the West' in which huge funds have been invested. It has been affirmed as a region without which the EU project cannot be completed. NATO Admiral Robert Burke recently posited in Belgrade that the Western Balkans is a crucial European sphere of interest; the current dynamics of security and stability in the Western Balkans was one of the main topics at the recent meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Riga.

The imposition of sanctions that cover the entire region show that the Balkans is sharply in the focus of the US. For now, its lens is guided on Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but Belgrade is undoubtedly on the horizon. Radojčić and Veselinović, close associates of Aleksandar Vučić - and of course Dodik - have already had their cards marked. President Vučić reacted moderately to the news about the sanctions; there is a possibility that he will not stand up for Dodik

since the next round of sanctions may also apply to his brother and Aleksandar Vulin, his closest associate.

The imposition of internationally metered sanctions have far-reaching consequences for all those targeted, for their companies, and for all those with whom they cooperate. The goal, as the US State Department emphasizes, is for these sanctions to challenge all those who threaten the stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity of BiH and who undermine the Dayton Peace Agreement, risking wider regional instability.

One burning question relates to NATO's determination to stand behind its principles in a tense, conflict-ready political situation. Will NATO stand in defense of its members in the Balkans and its declared interests in strategic diplomacy? Only the political establishment of Serbia (both Republika Srpska, and Serbian parties in Montenegro and Kosovo) rejects Western values and internationally recognized borders in the Balkans. Serbia continues to promote its "Serbian World" project, waiting for favorable historical circumstances. What will be the Russian reaction to the American offensive in the Balkans? Will Russia subordinate Serbian interests to its own regional interests in the context of negotiations on security issues in Geneva, intrinsically linked to the outcome of Biden-Putin talks?

The neglected and devastated Western Balkans will remain trapped by the geostrategic confrontations of major actors unless external support is provided - primarily in terms of stabilization, and the regional pacification of radical trends. Membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo into NATO is the only guarantee for the stabilization of the Balkans - a guarantee for building a just peace, which would ultimately lead to overcoming the legacy of the recent past.

THE GAP BETWEEN RHETORIC AND POLITICAL ACTION

Tanja Topić

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić recently gave an “ultimatum” to NATO and its Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg - while assuring the public in Serbia, the region and internationally that he is committed to peace and that it hurts when he is accused of “saber-rattling”. Nonetheless he engaged planes, tanks and helicopters prior to issuing the ultimatum, claiming he sought to prevent the “pogrom of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija” but without explaining what he meant by “pogrom”, nor when his ultimatum was supposed to take effect.

Some analysts in Serbia interpreted the troop movements and harsher rhetoric of official Belgrade as the “empty boasting of President Vučić” who, in addition to the ultimatum to NATO, was reported as having “sharply snapped at one ambassador of a very powerful Western country”.

Foreign policy commentator and analyst Boško Jakšić sees in these hyperbolic feats of Vučić “the rhetorical act of this whole play”, noting how the Serbian president, even during the latest tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, was careful not to violate the provisions of the Kumanovo Agreement.

The language of ultimatums is not how NATO operates

Meanwhile Milorad Dodik (member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency which he himself refuses to recognize) emerged from talks with Gabriel Escobar, US Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, cursing about the threat of sanctions (which he doesn't "give a **** for") and repeating the rhetoric: "Whatever you do all right, that's your business - but let's go back to this story of rhetoric. I've been listening to it for 20 years. Here you're trying to make us into obedient people who just need to say what suits you."

The language of ultimatums and threats is a characteristic of societies with authoritarian features in the political culture, and thus unfamiliar to military organisations such as NATO in their efforts to democratise such societies. Though if Vučić is to be believed, that doesn't mean that NATO can't understand such language. Aside from Serbia, and the parts of BiH that oppose NATO membership, for Croatia's neighbours it is a dream "to finally sit at a table with the big ones". At the same time, in Croatia they do not hide their joy over NATO membership, given the turbulent context of the former Yugoslavia territory.

University professor and geopolitics expert Vlatko Cvrtila, in an interview with zastita.info, spoke of how Croatia, as a "small country, by joining NATO jumped out of its regional context and directly into the strongest space in world politics". Meanwhile its neighbourhood is "under monitoring by the international community and NATO, so the Republic of Croatia can act towards the region from a completely new position - stronger than ever - and at the same time improve its own environment."

NATO and the arming of Serbia

This doesn't mean Croatia will now use force against anyone, explains Cvrtila, but rather that "from its position in a powerful organisation, it can more easily promote peace processes which would be in the interest of Croatia and other neighbouring countries." Belgrade

military analyst Aleksandar Radić also talks about how important media propaganda is in this narrative of “for” or “against” NATO:

“The whole story is turned into propaganda by the media when it comes to opposing views - in BiH and Serbia, but especially Serbia - towards NATO. One picture is created by the media for a domestic public who wants to be tucked into the story that NATO is on the other side of the front and that we love the Russians; and on the other hand you have a supply of arms coming from NATO. And of course, it would be tragicomic to see Serbia’s current status as anti-NATO because that is where the weapons are coming from.”

Radić adds that Serbia, although exempted from the current activities, intends to perform military exercises with NATO partner countries this year: “The ‘Platinum Wolf’ is being prepared; the Serbian-American parachute exercise planned for September in Serbian territory clearly speaks to all that.”

President Vučić is not that optimistic about the security situation. In Kranj at the start of October for the Summit of Heads of State and Governments from the European People’s Party (EPP), he pointed out that he “was not particularly happy with what I heard about BiH,” given the pronounced differences among the three nations at present. “It did not give me hope that we will be able to count with certainty on an absolutely safe and peaceful environment, to put it mildly,” Vucic said at a press conference in Slovenia.

When “concerned neighbours” make trouble

It is paradoxical that the unrest in BiH’s internal relations is being brought about by its “concerned neighbours” Serbia and Croatia; that is to say, by the political messaging being transmitted from these countries or by domestic political actors acting under Serbian or Croatian auspices. This is by no means to simplify or reduce the problem to one of rhetoric. Part of the political activity takes place at a level far from the public eye.

The most obvious example of this discrepancy (which I would say is also a public deception) is the attitude of the Republika Srpska (RS) political leadership towards the military exercises by BiH Armed Forces in Manjača, which were held together with the US Army in May 2021 as part of the "Quick Response 21" action. Regardless of political controversies, and despite the fact that BiH is not a member of NATO, a clear message was sent that BiH is regarded as a partner. Republika Srpska, without any jurisdiction, adopted a declaration of military neutrality while the Presidency of BiH unanimously supported the holding of the exercise, including those representatives who strongly oppose BiH becoming a NATO member. When he was President of the RS entity, Dodik had announced that he would call on 30,000 of his supporters to block a similar exercise in Manjača, although ultimately it was held with the consent of his political opponents (who form the current opposition in the BiH entity).

Relativizing the significance of performing this exercise again showed rhetorical prowess, with Dodik reducing it to online manoeuvres. BiH didn't join NATO at Manjača, but its closeness to the Alliance is testified to by the statement of General Christopher Cavoli, Commander of the United States Army Europe and Africa: "Such exercises between the armies of BiH and the United States are proof of what we can do, and together we can do everything. We are looking forward to continuing cooperation with the BiH Armed Forces as you progress on your path to NATO."

The influence of Russia, which is trying to keep both BiH and Serbia under its wing, must not be neglected here. At the same time as taking part in drills and receiving weapons from NATO, Serbia continues to cooperate with Moscow as it carries out a balancing act between the two sides - both of which are relevant for shaping the political situation in the Balkans. In the meantime, the Armed Forces of BiH are continuing with exercises and preparing the Battalion Group of Light Infantry for its 'Demanding Assessment' next year, which will be carried out entirely by NATO.

Cynicism of local authorities

There is little logic as to why the Armed Forces of BiH should have had a joint exercise with the Serbian Army in Manjača in mid-October 2021; the reasons given for its postponement are likewise incoherent. Altogether it's an excellent illustration of complete dilettantism and lack of vision at the very top of the state. Dodik (who doesn't recognise the state Presidency of which he is a member) himself requested the removal of Defense Minister Sifet Podžić from the "blockade"; the procedure was initiated by the Chair of the BiH Council of Ministers Zoran Tegeltija, whose explanation was that "Podžić violated the BiH Defense Law in the way he operated and made decisions, and through unilateral moves violated the rule of law and internal trust, as well as diplomatic relations and foreign cooperation."

The cynicism on display here is in those who daily violate the Constitution and laws of BiH (a fragile space legally and therefore in terms of security, as well as politically, economically and geopolitically) calling out neglect of the rule of law.

Internal trust has always rested on one-sided and exclusive narratives. In their analysis of 'Media image since the breakup of Yugoslavia to the present day', Mladen Bubonjić and Đordje Vujatović conclude that "In general none of these narratives (independence, unitarian, commemorative, generalist, relativist, ethnonationalist) contribute to the normalisation of relations. They are all exclusive, one-sided, duplicitous, unprincipled and often aggressive. Three decades since the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia, and a quarter of a century since the end of the war in BiH, the ethno-national positions of the former warring parties are still firmly cemented, with no indication of narratives softening or a true reconciliation process taking place. The events of the war continue to be interpreted as they were when they took place. Guilt is only viewed from one side, self-reflection and self-criticism practically do not exist."

Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a state of constant stalemate as regards processes of reform. It is illusory to talk about the level of democracy achieved: the security sector is not developed enough to deal with

threats and challenges, and the system does not operate according to the principles of an open society and open market.

Commit to reforms for NATO and the EU

These systemic weaknesses - and given what happened in BiH in the 1990s - should be a warning to decision-makers and quasi-political elites to focus on reforms and the integration of the country into both NATO and the European Union, instead of constant political blockades and the manufacturing of crises. To focus, for a change, on their own country rather than on those neighbouring it.

BiH is top of the league in Europe in terms of perceived corruption, and the political groups and criminal networks often overlap. The naive belief of international officials, primarily from the European Union, in 'stabilocracy' - the idea that domestic politicians are a guarantee of stability and peace in the region - has only served to strengthen autocratic regimes in both Serbia and BiH, stifling freedom of opinion and the media and devaluing individual human rights.

While the potential for armed conflict remains distant, there is a general insecurity - accompanied by constant crises, blockades, and corruption - that has ravaged the country materially, spiritually, culturally and economically. As we grope in the dark for so-called reforms, additional insecurity is created by the stream of people leaving BiH for very long periods of time.

Those who remain are exposed to media bombardment and poisoned by the dominant narratives mentioned by Bubonjić and Vujatović. The people love winners, even the imaginary ones created by the media and PR agencies of political actors.

"Thirty years after the beginning of the final disintegration of the SFRY, one gets the impression that the situation in society is the same, or at least similar, as in the wake of the war," Bubonjić and Vujatović point out. "Exclusivity, lack of integrity, hypocrisy, relativization, generalization, intolerance, hatred are more than present, and are corroding the already unhealthy social fabric of the states in the post-Yugoslav

region, especially in BiH...A political discourse dominated by intolerance and hatred has become an integral part of the narrative matrix, ie the value system in general, and - according to the perpetuum mobile principle - without spending too much energy it continues to burden the public sphere indefinitely." Thus do the authors highlight the biggest challenges on the way to joining a more civilised world.

They do not neglect the "bottom-up discourse" i.e the prevailing narrative present in the population - noting how it also does not differ significantly from the "top-down discourse" (that of the quasi-political elites). They are "mutually intertwined and conditioned, giving each other fuel. However, the greater guilt certainly lies with the political elites who present an aggressive discourse through the media, thus maintaining a state of latent intolerance."

THE BOSNIAN PATH TO NATO: BETWEEN FALSE NARRATIVES AND REALITY

Almir Džuvo

The history of the world is also the history of processes of integration. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, better known by its acronym NATO, was founded in a world that gathered its wreckage at the site of World War II with the aim of establishing freedom and democracy - that is, the security of its members - as a prerequisite for the true progress of mankind.

That is why the story of NATO is one of the most successful in world history. And it is natural to wish to be part of such a story. NATO is of crucial importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I think it is of the utmost importance that BiH becomes part of that success. NATO membership guarantees security, which leads to stability and generates prosperity (Transitive Relations).

However, being part of that story - being part of that successful "club" - doesn't mean you get to pass on your internal problems to others and not be a true and honest partner. It also doesn't mean ignoring the reality on the ground and pretending there are no differences of opinion about NATO membership.

Here we come to three key issues, which in short reflect the reality of relations between BiH and NATO.

Does BiH need NATO? The obvious answer to this question is YES. Is BiH now ready for NATO membership? Unfortunately, NOT yet. Is it realistic for BiH to become a NATO member in the future? According to many relevant appraisals, the answer to this crucial question is YES. However, BiH can achieve this goal only if it reaches a substantial internal consensus on joining the North Atlantic Alliance. Transferring internal disputes to the international level cannot be a successful accession strategy.

The importance of NATO lies in respecting its principles, goals and values. Although NATO membership, in addition to EU membership, is one of the two key strategic goals of BiH, there are significant political conflicts over full membership. But this does not mean that our country cannot work as a serious partner on reforms that are complementary to NATO standards, in order to cultivate those values and achieve those goals.

So, where is Bosnia and Herzegovina on its NATO path today?

The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is NATO's program of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. The official website of the North Atlantic Alliance clearly states that BiH is currently participating in this program.

However, the MAP is a form through which a particular state meets certain crucial reforms, programs, and goals. Its essence is reflected in the submission and fulfillment of criteria within the Annual National Program (ANP). All the political turmoil in BiH since the start of 2019 actually comes down to whether BiH will submit the ANP (and thus activate the MAP) or not.

Political bickering and disputes have neglected both the form and the essence. The ANP, as the essence, has been reduced to the title of the document. In public discourse in BiH, the ANP has become almost synonymous with membership. In order to resolve this stalemate, a Reform Program has been agreed upon - which basically means the same as the ANP. Through the Program, BiH continues to work

on reforms in more or less similar areas to those prescribed by the ANP. However, the Reform Program was accepted by the public because it is the result of a compromise reached by the members of the Presidency of BiH. In its substance it does not differ from the ANP, which is prepared by any country wishing to become a NATO member. It sets out the achievements and planned reforms in several areas, including political, security, legal and defence reforms.

So, NATO has stated unequivocally that BiH is participating in the MAP, and BiH is submitting a Reform Program more or less as substantial as the ANP. Considering the essence of the process - and the importance for BiH to continue implementing the reforms needed for NATO membership in the foreseeable future - it is less important at this point what the title of the document is, or the name of the commission working on it. Unfortunately, grasping this essence - the fulfilment of the necessary reforms - is often lost in the fog of daily politics; but the leaders of BiH must certainly not neglect it. Political representatives of the BiH entity of Republika Srpska do not accept NATO membership. But as long as BiH is working on the reforms needed for membership - as long as the substance of the document is being implemented - its form and title is less significant (at least until the conditions for changing it, as in communicating it to the public, are met).

A compromise on the title of the document and the commission was needed because the political leaders themselves initiated the conflict, and this served to obscure the essence. Hence, a compromise has been made in the form - but in essence BiH continues its path towards NATO by fulfilling the necessary reforms.

In pursuing this essence, it is important to consider whether its vocal opponents in BiH are really against NATO, or whether such a stance is only part of political rhetoric and propaganda. I think NATO opponents can be divided into different groups: Some oppose NATO because membership imposes certain rules and values. Others oppose membership for ideological reasons, mostly related to NATO's interventions in BiH in 1995 and the Republic of Serbia in 1999. Others exploit the NATO membership controversy as a means for achieving domestic political goals.

Ideologists will find it difficult to change their minds. Pragmatists will change their minds. Politicians who introduced NATO a few years ago as a topic and object of debate in their political disputes made a big mistake. With the added fuel of an aggressive media campaign, we arrive at a situation where it is very difficult to step back or compromise.

I believe that the best "advertisement" for NATO membership in BiH is in not using this topic for local political purposes. On the one hand, politicians talk about NATO and even give statements they might not want to give (at least the pragmatic ones); on the other hand some members of the public, who may not grasp the essential importance of NATO membership, are beginning to view the Alliance as something else to be rejected because it has been forced upon them by others.

Such are internal relations in BiH, where what is good for some represents a tragedy for others and vice versa - which further disrupts the integrative processes in society. This is, of course, the product of imposed narratives and cultivated mistrust - systematic attempts to destroy society - and not the real position and interest of the people of BiH.

Given how controversial NATO remains in BiH, due to the legacy of 1995/9, the greatest responsibility lies with those political forces that publicly support it. They should not use the topic of membership as a means for political point-scoring. That way, they will make it easier for pragmatists to work towards BiH joining the Alliance.

It will be difficult to change the negative perceptions, and require serious effort and adequate information sharing, as well as all the means of soft power available to NATO. Therefore, the debate should be kept out of the context of local political issues and the focus should be shifted to civil cooperation, security, the fight against terrorism and extremism, development capacities, transparency and economic development.

Bosnia and Herzegovina as a hostage of Serbia

In order to understand the extent to which the BiH political scene is burdened by spin, political myths and false dilemmas (which ultimately burden relations across the country and the region, as well as irresponsibly confusing its citizens), we can look at a paradigmatic example in the relations between Serbia and the North Atlantic Alliance.

In Serbia NATO is not such a big topic within local political disputes. There are several reasons for this, including the compactness of the state government, its internal organisation, and weak political opposition. It is also important to add that while the multinational character of BiH means that two of the three constituent parties support NATO, were NATO membership to become a topic of debate in Serbia, it would represent an inter-political conflict but without the interethnic dimension.

The result is that the Republic of Serbia has very strong and intensive relations with the North Atlantic Alliance - in some areas even stronger than BiH - which often go unnoticed in public. This is a significant paradox that is often overlooked. Unlike in BiH, where any mention of NATO by one side of the political divide is used to show the weakness of the other, Serbia in practice acts as a partner country - but tries to downplay the real importance of that cooperation due to negative public attitudes towards NATO.

The Republic of Serbia joined the Partnership for Peace with NATO in 2006 and has been part of the IPAP since 2015, which is a major step forward in mutual relations. These mechanisms allow NATO and Serbia to deepen their political processes, as well as practical cooperation via top-level political dialogue, joint military exercises, and various seminars and consultations. As part of the IPAP program, NATO and Serbia engage in over 200 activities a year. Some information suggests that over 70 percent of Serbia's Ministry of Defence activities take place with NATO or NATO member countries.

Thus, it is obvious that Serbia, as a partner country, has intensive relations with NATO although it has no ambition to become part of the NATO club. BiH, on the other hand, has a different status: the country is an aspirant, is part of the MAP, and has not declared neutrality towards NATO at the state level (unlike Serbia).

It could be said that formally Bosnia and Herzegovina is closer to membership, but that Serbia is at a higher and more extensive level of cooperation. In line with its needs and ambitions, as well as foreign policy, Serbia can choose from over 1,600 different activities to carry out with NATO. They are working on issues such as the reform of the armed forces and preparing the Serbian Army for UN and EU missions. In addition, they are working to manage emergencies and prepare the country and region for earthquake and other response scenarios.

Serbia cooperates in the field of security and defence sector reforms, and it has joined the Planning and Review Process (PARP). It participates in the Integrity Building Program (BI), Trust funds, scientific cooperation in security issues (Science for Peace and Security (SPS) program, etc.). At the symbolic level, it can also be seen that Serbia has good relations with NATO. Example to this is the fact that the former head of Military Representation in Serbia's Mission to NATO is currently the Chief of Staff of the Serbian Army; while the newly appointed Serbian Ambassador to NATO is a career diplomat who served as Assistant Foreign Minister for Security Policy.

I would like to emphasise that BiH is, in a way, a hostage of Serbia when it comes to its relationship with NATO, because sections of the BiH authorities take their lead from Serbian policy in their attitudes towards NATO. The mantra that NATO bombed Serbia in 1999 is still used in all public debates as an argument to prevent any cooperation in both Serbia and BiH. The difference is that in Serbia the government has the ability to control public opinion, while in BiH the story is used not only for political but also for interethnic bickering.

Dangerous role of Russia

Some external factors also see their opportunity in all of this. Russia exploits internal discord and division over NATO issues. In this way, it fuels emotions about the past and emphasises the topic of NATO membership in order to further divide and cement domestic political views on NATO.

It is no secret that Russia does not want NATO expansion. It was against that in the past, over the membership of both Croatia and Albania previously as well as the membership of Northern Macedonia and Montenegro more recently. BiH, Montenegro and Serbia have been hardest hit by Russian (mis)information operations trying to undermine the European Union and NATO in the region.

Russia's attitude towards NATO is reflected in its attitude towards BiH. This recently culminated in a statement from the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Sarajevo, which unequivocally stated its position on the promotion of NATO in BiH, as well as about the country's possible membership. The Embassy was reacting to the continuation of cooperation in general, but also to the reforms (important for potential membership) implemented by the Council of Ministers (via the new Reform Program and the NATO Cooperation Commission) and the Parliament (via the Working Group for Cooperation with NATO).

Although the Russian Embassy's reaction to the discussions on relations between BiH and NATO followed in response to numerous publications praising the benefits of BiH's membership of NATO, it is possible that it was mostly addressed to Republika Srpska authorities, since the cooperation with NATO is essentially continuing. And that's what matters: more work, less talk.

So: more essence, less form. Russia uses BiH as part of the grand Cold War chess board in terms of its relations with NATO. But NATO also has the soft power to change public perceptions about the Alliance over time. Until such a time, it is necessary to work on the reforms without a lot of fuss.

Instead of conclusion

In the end I return to the essence, which is the most important. I believe that, over time, a new generation of political leaders will realise the importance of the North Atlantic Alliance and the full membership of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina in that alliance.

To achieve this, NATO in BiH must cease being the object of political bickering. NATO must not get involved in local disputes or allow itself to be an object of daily discussion.

From the position of BiH, NATO must be the most important partner - someone who is trusted and is a role model. The North Atlantic Alliance offers an attractive partnership: something visible, realistic, and that we know brings security, stability and prosperity. It must be demonstrated to the public that NATO is much more than a war story from the 1990s.

In short, NATO is the most important and most desirable partner for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. But that path must be honest and needs to be generally accepted.

BIH AND THE TEMPTATION OF CLOSER RELATIONS WITH NATO

Dr. Dušan Janjić

While the current security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a period of relative strength, recent strikes and political demonstrations indicate the continuing presence of possible security threats. Contributing factors include the negative socio-political effects of reforms, and it is likely that the current economic crisis and recession will continue, with a concomitant rise in unemployment and impoverishment.

This, in conjunction with an ongoing political struggle for redistribution of power, directly threatens the human security and national stability of BiH. This situation is compounded by the incompetence of the national leadership and state administration, and the apparent aversion to progressive reform displayed by the ruling political elites in BiH. The existence of centres of informal power is in fact the greatest security threat, preoccupied as these are with the legitimization of wealth gained through nefarious activities: corruption, war profiteering, illegal businesses and organised crime. The preponderance of ethnonationalist policies, ethnic divisions, and civil mistrust have an extremely unfavourable effect on security, heightening the risk of new threats to human life and territorial integrity. Some leaders and their interest groups, bolstered by their “war merits” and ethnonationalist monopolies over the representation of “constructive peoples”, are opting for the status quo rather than reform.

In terms of positive security indicators, BiH is not at least in direct danger from an external armed force; The Dayton Agreement and other political, legal and strategic documents have regulated many of the issues surrounding defence, the army and the police, and established principles for building peace and strengthening security. There are also numerous official documents that provide a solid basis for future relations with NATO, as Almir Džuvo convincingly argued in *Nezavisne Novine* on May 7, 2021. Despite difficulties, compromises and the like, reforms are indeed being implemented across all elements of the security system, and cooperation has been established with NATO as the actor capable of having the greatest impact on the national security of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At the same time, the BiH leadership does not have a unified vision of the future or a unified response to the challenges of reform. This highlights the need for a public debate on the benefits of NATO membership. The primary argument in favour is that membership would guarantee Bosnia and Herzegovina's security by reducing the risk of war, particularly given the fact that neighbouring countries Croatia and Montenegro are NATO members. Membership would also increase the capacity of the state in the fight against organized crime and terrorism. Another salient point for those advocating BiH joining NATO is that it constitutes a "gateway" for also joining the European Union, i.e. NATO membership would expedite Bosnia and Herzegovina's potential accession to the EU.

According to Džuvo, there are many arguments for regarding BiH as a hostage of Serbia, not only in terms of NATO membership but across a spectrum of issues related to reforms, security, stability and foreign policy - particularly given the support of the ruling party in Republika Srpska and its leader to moving away from the EU and US sphere of influence and getting closer to Russia. However, there are also numerous unresolved issues within BiH itself that are pushing Serbs, the RS and their leaders towards close cooperation with Serbian authorities, along with occasional "glances" towards the East. Undoubtedly these issues can be eliminated most quickly and effectively by deepening economic and social reforms, as well as making

the idea of the common state a desirable goal. One of the ways for political and other actors to fulfil their "basic task" on the key issues of peace and development in BiH - about which Džuvo writes - is to generate the political will for joining NATO.

During the 1990s, primarily because of reliance on armed violence to "resolve" 'national issues' and interethnic relations, Serbia and the Serbian nation came into conflict with many international laws and norms, and even got into armed conflicts on the territory of the former common state. That included an armed conflict with NATO - primarily with the United States and the leading countries of the European Community at the time. This is evidenced by NATO's role in supporting the forces of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the wars there, as well as NATO airstrikes on Republika Srpska army positions and the capture of "hostages" (more than three hundred UNPROFOR soldiers and members of other international organisations) by the Republika Srpska Army in May 1995; there was also the NATO military intervention against the FRY in 1999. Serbia's relationship with NATO from 2001 to the present day has been kept under the public radar; the status now is that only one step remains: to request NATO membership. At the same time, cooperation with Russia is being publicly promoted and overemphasised. Serbian membership of NATO is avoided as a public topic - while the role of NATO members in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the attitude towards the policy of Serbia and Serbian nationalist parties at that time - many of which are still in power in Serbia - is frequently discussed. In BiH and Serbia ideological and political reasons play an important role in this, as well as mutually exclusive and conflicting narratives about NATO's interventions in BiH in 1995 and the Republic of Serbia in 1999.

In Serbia, and among Serbs in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina - especially in the Republika Srpska - this narrative is based on a set of assumptions: that victimhood should form the backbone of identity; belief in a special historical role (or even holy predestination) for the Serbian nation in terms of superiority in freedom, culture, faith etc.; and a strong anti-Western and anti-modernisation

sentiment that looks instead towards Russia and, in this case, proclaims NATO's military intervention as unjust and illegitimate. This interpretation is based on two claims: firstly, that the anti-Serbian position of the West did not respect the legitimate interests of Serbia and Serbs during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia; and secondly that NATO, which on the 50th anniversary of its existence in the mid-Nineties faced deep internal problems which threatened its dissolution, used military interventions and its stance towards Serbia and Serbs to demonstrate a unity that didn't actually exist.

The potential responsibility of the policy pursued at the time by the authorities of Serbia and Montenegro - i.e., the FRY - is not recognized. An important element in this narrative is the false idea of Russia's role: the Kremlin allegedly supported Slobodan Milošević's government, was against NATO military action, and did everything in its power to prevent the intervention. However, an insight into latterly available and published documents demonstrating Moscow's attitude towards NATO's military interventions will contribute to a more objective view of Russia's role - because these documents show that Russia was actually driven by the need for cooperation with the United States and the EU / the West.

In Montenegro the dominant narrative until 2004 was basically the same as in Serbia. Over time however it has been replaced by the narrative of Montenegro's progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration. The previous narrative is maintained, but in public discourse the representatives of the authorities do not mention the NATO intervention itself, or else the military action against Montenegro is treated as "collateral punishment" for belonging to the FRY.

The major narrative in Kosovo and among Albanians is that NATO's military action was justified, and that the Alliance bore responsibility for preventing a humanitarian catastrophe, protecting Albanians, and supporting the realisation of their right to a state - the Republic of Kosovo. There is a similar narrative among Bosniaks and Croats, and it includes close co-operation and NATO membership as a desirable outcome.

Both narratives completely ignore the fact that Russia cooperated with the West in ending armed conflicts and in reaching the Dayton Agreement and the Kumanovo Agreement on Military Cooperation and the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1244. Both these agreements enshrine the most important values and goals for peace-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and include NATO. An assessment of these facts demonstrates that the most effective way to suppress damaging ideological and political narratives is to hold up the truth - and to make this available to citizens through media and other civic-building activities, and to younger generations through the education system. Almir Džuvo is right when he points out the need for the political will to do that - requiring, as it does, "serious effort and adequate information sharing, as well as the use of all means of the soft power policy that NATO has at its disposal."

The current relationship between Serbia and NATO is determined by the Resolution on the Territorial Integrity of Serbia, adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in December 2007. Item 6 reads: "Due to the overall role of the NATO pact, from the illegal bombing of Serbia in 1999, unsupported by a UN Security Council decision, to Annex 11 of the rejected Ahtisaari Plan, which stipulates that NATO is the 'final body' of government in an 'independent Kosovo', the National Assembly announces the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia in relation to existing military alliances, until the possibility of calling a referendum to make a final decision on the issue." Serbia's military neutrality is interpreted as a way of achieving EU membership while avoiding NATO membership. However, unlike some other European countries whose neutral status has been acknowledged, Serbia's military neutrality has not been recognized in international agreements and is therefore "incomplete". In addition, the Resolution leaves open the possibility of joining one of the military alliances. The limiting factor to Serbia's military neutrality lies in the characteristics of the region in which it is located: six of the eight countries bordering Serbia are members of NATO.

The fact is that Serbia is in strong cooperation with NATO, that the country joined the Partnership for Peace in 2006, it has been a part of

IPAP since 2015, and that through IPAP programs Serbia and NATO carry out more than 200 activities a year.

Given the fact that EU and NATO membership are part of the same process (of Euro-Atlantic integration), it is realistic to assume that, now or in the future, the Serbian leadership will give priority to the development of Serbia, which includes NATO membership. Eventual membership of Serbia in NATO would not be of great military-strategic importance for NATO, but it would have a significant and positive effect on the relaxation of relations among the countries in the region, and would promote good neighbourly cooperation, reconciliation, and an attractive business environment. Serbian membership of NATO would put an end to advocating for border changes and armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. It would also encourage finding creative means to resolve the Kosovo issue peacefully and amicably.

The interests of Serbia itself require its leadership to cooperate with all the political and social actors among the Serbian community in the region - especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is in Serbia's interest to unblock the paralysis of political life in the Republika Srpska and open up the possibility of free expression for RS and BiH citizens on crucial issues such as NATO membership. Just as it is in Serbia's interest for its citizens to decide freely, without external interference, on their future, the same principle must apply to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The current "hostage crisis" has lasted too long and has allowed for the "continuation of the state of war by other means". The choice is clear: the path must be paved for Serbia's and BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration. This is also the path to victory for Serbian independence - that is, its liberation from dependence on Moscow, and its possibility of trade with the West.

Pursuing a common interest in cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina, including NATO membership, is to affirm the system of collective security as the guarantor of national security. It is to guarantee the immutability of borders either by violence or without the consent of all concerned; to strengthen economic stability via safeguards for foreign investment and support for foreign capital to enter the domestic economy; and to establish control over risky extremist

groups. In addition, for Bosnia and Herzegovina, joining the Euro-Atlantic Alliance means finally establishing peace, thus paving the way for reducing ethnic tensions and strengthening social integration. Such a path - one that allows for "closing the 1990s and opening up the question of Bosnia and Herzegovina" and cooperating with Serbia - is the only route to survival and sustainable development. Moreover, without Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, there is no possibility of a Western Balkans free area, or what some are calling "Mini Schengen".

NATO & YOUTH – GREAT EXPECTATIONS ARE UNDER THREAT

Hana Sokolović

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as across the entire Western Balkans region, rarely get talked about in the places where political decisions get made. Sometimes high-ranking officials are guests at the events where civil society organizations mark different international days; very occasionally at one of these, or during numerous interviews on day-to-day politics they do, just for a moment, show some concern about the youth in BiH. Actually, it's not so clear whether their concern is for young people themselves, or over the loss of taxes and other contributions because of the massive increase in numbers leaving the country.

In several studies conducted in BiH, "uncertainty" stands out as a key word in terms of the main reasons given for why thousands of young people decide to use their potential and meet their needs outside of their homeland.¹

According to the findings of a new representative survey published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and carried out among 18- to 29-year-olds, almost every other young person in BiH - 47 percent - is considering leaving the country temporarily or

1 Lejla Turčilo, Amer Osmić, Damir Kapidžić, Sanela Šadić, Jusuf Žiga, Anida Dudić, Studija o mladima 2018/2019, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, dostupno na: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/15288.pdf>

permanently.² Corruption, distrust of institutions, and the impression of not being involved in decision-making processes about the future also underline why young people prefer to be “warmed” by the sun somewhere else. The perception of security has changed over time. After the initial experience of security as the absence of existential threats, today this feeling encompasses a far greater number of dimensions - regional, social, environmental and others (Banasik, 2021). Underlying why decisions related to security and stability are very important for young people is the basic, logical fact that these decisions define the future in which young people will necessarily participate.

How to get protection and security?

For decades psychology has been teaching us that a sense of security results, among other things, from structure and predictability. On paper the existing framework for the functioning of BiH provides (some) structure and predictability. In practice things are very different. During each pre-election cycle political tensions rise - and unfortunately for the citizens of this country elections (local and general) come around every two years, so that life is practically reduced to a permanent pre-election campaign. In recent months the politics of arrogance and force on the one hand, and the consequences of focusing on personal rather than state interests on the other have resulted, according to many, in BiH's greatest post-war crisis. Naturally this creates a situation of significant fear for many in society. In analysis of the current crisis there is, as is traditional, a complete lack of attention given to young people and their sense of security. Institutions fail to offer it, and politicians even less. And having run out of internal targets to address, we start looking for security from the outside. As such there is a growing expectation of the international community providing mechanisms to stop the crisis and restore a sense of security to citizens.

2 UNFPA, Zbog loše kvalitete života, gotovo polovina mladih u Bosni i Hercegovini razmišlja o iseljavanju, pokazuje istraživanje, 2021 <https://ba.unfpa.org/bs/news/zbog-lo%C5%A1e-kvalitete-%C5%BEivota-gotovo-polovina-mladih-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-razmi%C5%A1ja-o-iseljavanju> pristupljeno 20. januara 2022.

Among the many international actors in BiH, and not as visible as some, there is a NATO Mission. Its mission in the country “includes support for peace and stability in BiH and the region, fighting against corruption, and the promotion of values such as democracy, freedom and rule of law; as well as support for efforts to give women their full place in society and create conditions for investment and economic development. Ultimately, the goal of these activities is to make the daily life of everyone in BiH better.”³

Democracy, freedom, rule of law, equality of women: all topics that young people are trying, via the civil sector, to imprint on the daily political narrative and priorities of those who claim to represent them. That is how come, in the midst of the political crisis, the NATO Mission in BiH supported the youth conference ‘Future in Peace’, held in Banja Luka in December 2021. Fifty young people from all over the country spent five days listening and working on issues of peace, critical thinking, and combatting lies and spin in conventional and social media. The name of the conference contains two words at the heart of the uncertainty felt by a generation of young people: future and peace. In the midst of a political crisis adorned with war rhetoric, young people from across BiH chose to attend on a voluntary basis, an event in Banja Luka supported by NATO. And in a parallel universe that would be nothing special. In this one in which we live, in which there are still young people who have never stepped outside the entity where they were born, that is special. It is also special that despite educational indoctrination and nationalist political narratives, there is a generation of young people who resist this onslaught. To know that at least a part of the younger generation in BiH is ready to step out of the imposed collectives in which we are always “better” than the others - whoever we are and whoever they are - is a great thing, especially at this moment. I met such people while working at the conference in Banja Luka - young people who do not think it is stupid to advocate for peace.

3 NATO, Misija NATO štaba Sarajevo, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/hqsarajevo/jezici-bosne-i-hercegovine/nato-i-bosna-i-hercegovina/misija-nato-staba-sarajevo>, pristupljeno 20. januara 2022.

It is more than clear that NATO membership is not a certain political option for BiH due to disagreement by politicians from the BiH entity of Republika Srpska. However, while waiting for the moment when commonsense civic needs will be more important than political considerations, it is worth remembering that NATO conducted its first major crisis response operation in BiH. The NATO-led Peace Implementation Force (IFOR) was deployed in December 1995 to implement the military aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement and was replaced a year later by the NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR).⁴ Today, the NATO Headquarters located in Sarajevo cooperates with institutions in various fields - primarily the defense and security sector, but also on numerous challenges related to the reforms necessary on the path to BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration. Logically, in the search for security, the European Union would seem to be a refuge for guaranteeing that people in this area do not experience a repeat of the horrors of war. However, the experience of the last two and a half decades has shown that the European Union, in a group embrace that guarantees protection, does not want to include those who have not shown the will or capacity to work on themselves.

Can only young people join NATO?

They can. And that is where they go. Data from the publication "Sustainability of Emigration from Bosnia and Herzegovina", published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation show that the number of residence permits issued to BiH citizens has been growing since 2014 in three key EU countries: Germany, Slovenia and Croatia.⁵ All three are members of NATO. But the issue of NATO membership seems to become irrelevant to those who used to have an opinion on it when in BiH once they arrive in other countries (who have been members of NATO for years) - whose essence is to share responsibility for risk and security. The same security that BiH does not provide to young

4 NATO, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/hqsarajevo/jezici-bosne-i-hercegovine/nato-i-bosna-i-hercegovina>, pristupljeno 20. januara 2022.

5 Anto Domazet, Vjekoslav Domljan, Almir Peštek, Faruk Hadžić, Održivost emigracija iz Bosne i Hercegovine, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung BiH, Sarajevo, 2020, dostupno na: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/16523.pdf>

people. Coming back to the confines of everyday life - isn't it a pleasant thought to have thirty guaranteed allies with you when someone attacks you? That a robber who wants to steal your bag on the street will be stopped by thirty persons around you? It is structure and predictability. The realization that bad things can happen, but also that there is someone who will protect you from them. Considering the fact that literally everything is politicized in BiH, anyone who spends a month of their life here cannot be surprised by the fact that the attitude towards NATO is a strictly political decision. Packed within the framework of group national identities, which are mainly important only when the electorate is to be mobilized, such an idea makes sense. When it comes to the question of life and the future of this country any idea that produces additional uncertainty, the potential for re-traumatization, or new trauma, is pointless. Protection and security are necessary starting points for the desire of the young people we are talking about not to look for protection under some other sky. Because, adapting Aleksa Šantić's poem to this topic, politics seems to be telling young people every day: don't stay here - security under some other sky will protect you as the one under ours does not.

NATO AND THE YOUTH OF BIH – OPPORTUNITIES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Slobodan Blagovčanin

Over seventy years since the largest military alliance in human history was founded, for the people of the Balkans the NATO Alliance carries many negative associations - including conflicts, bombings and military interventions.

However, the more positive perspective - less commonly represented, especially in the media - is that NATO is probably the biggest guarantor of peace and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is particularly important for young people, who have no doubt about the need to come up with new peace solutions if they are to stay and live in BiH. The presence of the NATO Alliance, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership in that alliance, does not only guarantee peace, but also has wider favourable effects on the opportunities and possibilities for young people domestically. NATO membership affords BiH the status of being a country safe and profitable for investment and development, opening up the space for new outside investors. At the time of writing, thus far the NATO Headquarters in Sarajevo has put most of its energy, resources and knowledge into the military training of citizens - i.e. the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the strong desire to maintain peace in BiH, and to enable a normal life

for citizens, is also reflected in more wide-ranging activities aimed at supporting and strengthening the Armed Forces.

The military exercises that NATO soldiers perform in BiH territory continue to receive the most media attention - such as those that took place last year in Manjača. However, it is important to continually emphasize the support reflected in activities that directly benefit citizens. This involves, for example, the willingness of NATO Headquarters to equip the Armed Forces with quality equipment - like helicopters that can respond to potential natural disasters in BiH, or the emergency transportation of patients.

This civic care element of NATO is the key value we need to empower in people's minds, and in the media outlets of BiH. Direct cooperation and potential membership of NATO forces will massively benefit the citizens of BiH, whether we are talking about lasting stability and peace, contingency for natural disasters, or marking the territory of BiH as safe for investment.

While considering these advantages, we must not forget that it is necessary to meet certain requirements for NATO membership, as well as membership in the European Union - requirements that go beyond the political will of the majority of the citizens (which currently does not even exist in at least half of BiH territory). A state that is at the very top of corruption lists and that functions with a discriminatory constitution, which in the past 26 years has shown little desire for progress and development, is not attractive for any alliance. Furthermore, these circumstances are not attractive for young people who, for decades - in order to ensure a safe and normal existence - have frequently chosen to buy a one-way ticket out. Regardless of their ethnic background they usually decide to move to NATO alliance member states: Germany, USA, Netherlands, Croatia, Slovenia...

Before we deal with the opportunities for young people in BiH, when it comes to the NATO mission it is worth mentioning the example of one of the countries close to us in the Balkans - Albania. It is apparent that in the years following their accession to NATO together with the Republic of Croatia in 2009, many things have changed in Albanian

society. Since 2009 and joining the NATO alliance, the Republic of Albania has recorded continuous economic growth. Although it is still considered the country with the worst economy among all members of the NATO alliance, this growth is clear if we refer to GDP figures or citizens' salaries.

Albania's development since 2009 is highly visible to those who have visited as tourists in recent years. A large number of foreign investors have put money into tourism and other industries in Albania, bringing new jobs and an improved set of social circumstances for young people. The overall development of Albania in the past twelve years has gone along with the construction of better transport infrastructure - fast roads and highways that today connect almost all the most important economic, educational and tourist centers. Tirana and Durrës (the two largest centers) are ever more closely linked, a tendency especially evident when driving on the highway between these two cities. Many large global companies have decided to open their offices in this area and offer jobs and hope for young Albanians. Data from www.worlddata.info clearly shows the increase in the number of tourists in Albania during the period from 2009 to 2019, from about 1.8 million tourists in 2009 to about 6.4 million ten years later. NATO membership is not the only economic reason for the rejuvenation of certain aspects of life in Albania, but it is certainly a factor that we must not ignore. NATO membership does not only mean the maintenance of peace and the absence of war. It is also a declaration that the member is open to international cooperation, new investments, and far-reaching economic development for the citizens and systems of that state.

It is illuminating to follow the connection between BiH's NATO membership process and Albania's, for several reasons. There are many parallels across their history, culture and tradition. Demographically these two countries are very similar to each other in terms of population size; but they are also linked by their respective experiences of turbulence during the twentieth century. Despite conflict in the 1990s taking place across almost the entire territory of BiH, until relatively recently it had a much more significant global position and potential

for development than Albania. Unfortunately, after twelve years of Albanian membership in NATO things have changed significantly, and today the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is much more uncertain, and demands cohesive engagement.

The crimes of the “war group” of politicians in BiH has led to a huge population exodus. Figures on the emigration of citizens suggest that over fifty thousand people depart the country every year looking for greater economic security and opportunity. These emigrants are predominantly young people, those whom our politics and policies were supposed to empower domestically. One of the examples of how NATO Headquarters can work with young people to realize the full potential of those who want to stay in BiH, and create more secure and safer futures, is through direct cooperation. An example of this took place in December 2021, when young people from the northeastern part of BiH gathered around the initiatives of the Youth Resource Center Tuzla “Citizens Against Terrorism B&H” (CAT BiH), and, in cooperation with NATO forces, organized a youth conference called “Future in Peace” - #FIPCON.

The youth conference gathered more than fifty young people from all over BiH in one of the country’s most important cities - Banja Luka. The conference’s title - “Future in Peace” - defined its agenda. During a time of political turmoil among the representatives of different ethnic groups in BiH, these young people pointed out the importance of the goals that NATO forces have been working on for the past 26 years in the country. Threats to peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina are aptly demonstrated by the large amount of misinformation spread every day on social media, and often also in traditional media across the country. This tendency is also highlighted by the situation with the current pandemic: we are a country with an extremely high COVID 19 death rate and at the same time we have the lowest rate of vaccinated citizens. The “infodemic” has, regrettably, been manifest in the (mis)information channeled through various “portaloids”. This became one of the most important issues that young people dealt with at #FIPCON.

A unique and responsible attitude with which to approach important youth issues (and those of wider society) became particularly visible during the last days of the conference, when participants were randomly divided into eight groups and began to work on designing their own initiatives. Regardless of their social background, fifty young people worked together on campaigns aiming to raise awareness of issues surrounding misinformation, media literacy, peace building and youth activism. This displayed a strong collective desire to to be active participants in building a better society in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In just four days of dedicated work, and through a process of mentoring by members of CAT BiH, these online campaigns have become visible and viral among the groups identified and targeted for communication. We believe that #FIPCON is just the beginning of a more active cooperation between the NATO mission and young people in order to ensure a secure and stable future. This is intended to prevent the possibility of interethnic conflicts and over time create more favorable conditions for new investments in BiH. As such the cooperation between the youth sector and the NATO Headquarters in Sarajevo is not only focussed on the development of a conflict-resistant society. The intention is to create a fully functional, thriving society which will be able to overcome economic challenges and create a sense of security for all citizens of BiH, regardless of their ethnicity.

Perhaps that is not the goal of the current nationalist parties, ruling since the 1990s - but young people have different agendas. Those young people who have not been seduced by the possibilities of economic emigration wish to remain in BiH and fight for a safe and open society.

OPINION

Eric Folkestad

Brigadier General U.S. Army
Commander, NATO Headquarters Sarajevo

For the last 12 months I have had the privilege of Commanding NATO Headquarters Sarajevo. It has been an incredible year, during which I have positively fallen in love with Bosnia and Herzegovina: its stunning natural beauty and, from its largest cities to the smallest towns across the country, the unfailingly hospitable and genuinely welcoming people.

During this time, I have seen for myself the positive impact that BiH's partnership with NATO can bring for every citizen of BiH. As a result, my passion for NATO's mission here and my genuine desire to find new ways to support all those who are working tirelessly together, irrespective of ethnicity, to ensure a successful, secure and positive future for BiH, has increased exponentially. As I have travelled the length and breadth of this wonderful country, people have been crying out for progress and reforms which attract investment, create jobs, improve services, and which will encourage young people to stay in BiH and help build a brighter future, which is all anyone wants.

That's what NATO stands for as well. And I don't just mean within those countries which have become members of the alliance - although you only have to look around the region to see the huge

benefits that citizens of countries across the region have experienced as a result of joining NATO.

I'm also talking about incremental and often technical reforms that NATO and its allies assist with in BiH each and every day. Reforms which lay the groundwork for lasting security and better prosperity for all. In addition to jobs and the economy, citizens throughout BiH consistently cite corruption as one of their key concerns. Thanks to BiH's involvement in NATO's Building Integrity Programme, the Ministry of Defense has a 2020-2024 Plan of Integrity and Fight Against Corruption. Regulations – including the Code of Ethics – for military personnel have also been updated and strengthened. We have also seen a highly effective Inspector General program in the Armed Forces that provides members with an outlet to voice concerns and seek remedies. And we know that once you start the process of reform, it snowballs – because nothing succeeds like success. So reforms in the defense and security sectors become a model for other areas of public administration to follow. Citizens are concerned about the security - and human - impact of natural disasters, so NATO and its allies work to increase the ability of AFBiH to support the civilian population and authorities. There is tremendous capability in this area, with military helicopters capable of casualty evacuation, search and rescue and tackling forest fires, while AFBiH units have water rescue capabilities that can get people to safety in a flood. And most of all an Armed Forces committed to making the countryside safe for everyone - thus driving tourism and economic growth – by ridding BiH of landmines using their expert abilities in removal and responding to incidents.

We also support the Ministry of Security – and emergency response teams at all levels of government – to ensure that they can communicate and save vital seconds during a crisis. NATO has invested over 7 million Euro in the MIT-designed Next Generation Incident Command System (NICS), which allows different agencies to see the same real-time information and talk to each other. It proved incredibly effective during an exercise BiH hosted in 2017 - and in a similar large-scale exercise using the system and involving responders

from across the region, including BiH, which took place in North Macedonia in 2021. It was also used during an exercise involving rescue teams from across BiH during a domestic exercise last summer. The NICS is not only configured for wide area incident management by tapping into GIS databases, it can also leverage the smart phones belonging to first responder personnel to instantly expand situational awareness and connect everyone involved. I was really impressed with this system during the wildfire season in BiH. And during COVID, NATO allies not only donated millions of Euros worth of life-saving medical equipment and vaccines, they supported AFBiH teams deployed into communities to disinfect schools and hospitals.

Meanwhile, despite the challenges they face, the Armed Forces have proved that they are a credible and capable military force: they successfully passed three of the four milestones which will result in their being accredited to international interoperability standards. That is an awesome achievement – and testament to the dedication, professionalism and commitment of the men and women of the armed forces and their military and political leaders.

The AFBiH is one of the most successful multi-ethnic institutions in BiH. Without a doubt, that has been my experience this year. From the newest recruit to the leadership of both the MoD and Joint Staff I have seen ethnicity put aside in favour of unity of effort and common purpose – as well as leaders who have set an example for other institutions to follow: working together to implement much needed reforms that will make life better and create capacity to make everyone in BiH safer. 2021 saw AFBiH engage in their biggest ever bilateral exercise - and successfully prove that they can operate shoulder-to-shoulder with US forces, as well as work with counterparts from around the world in UN peacekeeping operations. Everyone in BiH should be proud of the incredible job the armed forces do, and for the way in which in all of their interactions – from graduating top of their class from international military academies to taking part in exercises to supporting international missions - they are true ambassadors for BiH around the world.

I have loved every second of time I have spent with them, and my time in BiH. It has truly won my heart – and I genuinely wish I could stay longer. And because of that I can say with absolute conviction that I will come back. And my greatest hope is that I return to a country enjoying the bright future of peace, stability and prosperity befitting all the wonderful people I have met this year.

