

Montenegro: Towards full NATO membership

In May 2016, Montenegro signed its accession protocol with NATO, entering the final phase of becoming its 29th member. Although joining NATO has long been a strategic priority for the Montenegrin government, the issue is far from uncontroversial. Low public support in the country and the threat of Russian counter-measures remain major challenges to be addressed.

NATO in the Western Balkans

From the 1990s on, NATO has been an [important factor](#) for stability and peace in the Western Balkans, although its role has evolved significantly. Its interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina ([1995](#) and [1999](#)) and in Kosovo ([1999](#)), and its subsequent peacekeeping functions have largely been replaced by the goal of Euro-Atlantic integration, reflected in its 2010 [Strategic Concept](#). However, a small number of NATO troops are still present [in Kosovo](#), guaranteeing its security and the implementation of the 2013 [Belgrade-Pristina Agreement](#). NATO has consistently sought closer ties with the region and assisted it to advance defence reforms, armed forces cooperation and security ownership at local level. NATO's 2012 [Chicago Summit](#) confirmed that its door remains open to all European democracies which meet membership requirements. All countries from the region except Kosovo have participated in the [Partnership for Peace Programme](#) (PfP). Slovenia, Croatia, and Albania are NATO members, while [FYR Macedonia](#) and [Bosnia](#) are candidates. Although it is not an applicant, Serbia also seeks closer [cooperation](#) with NATO. After its [2009 enlargement](#), in 2015 NATO [reaffirmed](#) its 'open door policy' and invited Montenegro to join.



Source: EPRS.

Montenegro and NATO: a decade of rapid developments

From May 2006, when it [declared](#) independence, to May 2016, when it [signed](#) its accession protocol with NATO, Montenegro has gone a [long way](#) towards Euro-Atlantic integration, at the same time progressing along the [EU path](#). As a 'champion' of regional cooperation with no unresolved issues with its neighbours, enjoying a good balance of minorities and ethnic groups and boasting considerable political, economic and defence reforms, Montenegro formally meets NATO's membership requirements. Its candidacy was first considered at NATO's 2014 [Wales Summit](#); an invitation followed in 2015 as acknowledgement of the progress it had made in a relatively short time. The ensuing [accession talks](#) in February 2016 covered the political, military and legal aspects of its future membership. As of May 2016, Montenegro is said to [have de facto joined](#) the Alliance. It will be [involved](#) in NATO activities and meetings as an [invitee](#), including in the [Warsaw Summit](#) in July. Montenegro will [sign](#) the Washington Treaty and become a [formal member](#) once the accession protocol is ratified by all 28 NATO members and Montenegro itself, expected [by mid-2017](#).

Framework for cooperation: At the 2006 [Riga Summit](#), Montenegro joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the [Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council](#). In this framework, it started a broad programme of reforms. At the 2008 [Bucharest Summit](#), NATO welcomed the country's decision to develop an [Individual Partnership Action Plan](#) (IPAP). In 2009, the country joined the [Membership Action Plan](#) (MAP), designed for aspirant countries, and soon after started its first MAP cycle by submitting its first Annual National Programme.

Key areas of cooperation include defence/security sector reform, civil emergency planning and security-related [scientific cooperation](#). In the PfP framework, Montenegro participates in joint planning, training and military exercises with NATO forces. In 2010, it contributed to the NATO-led [International Assistance Force in](#)



[Afghanistan](#), and currently supports the [follow-on mission](#). It has also sent personnel to UN and EU missions (in [Liberia](#), [Cyprus](#), and [Somalia](#)), indicating its potential for contributing to future NATO deployments.

Joining NATO: what challenges for Montenegro?

NATO membership is not devoid of controversy and is likely to have [political consequences](#). Beside the challenge of low public support, the issue has heated the political climate, leading to anti-NATO protests and calls for a referendum. Furthermore, Russia sees the move as a security threat and has reacted sharply.

Public support: the weak spot

Apart from political and military reforms, NATO membership requires sufficient public support. However, Montenegrins remain almost equally [divided](#) over the issue, favouring EU integration above all. There are '[economic, emotional and internal political aspects](#)' that may partly explain why NATO is a controversial topic: the big share of ethnic Serbs; memories of NATO's 1999 military intervention; the potential impact on relations with Russia; and insufficient civil society involvement in the country's reform process. Nevertheless, [recent opinion polls](#) note slightly increasing support for NATO accession compared to [2014](#): 47.3% are in favour, 31.1% are against and 15.6% are undecided. In December 2015, NATO's Secretary-General called on Montenegro to keep building [public understanding](#) of NATO membership and support for it.

Domestic political context

In the autumn of 2015, Montenegro was besieged by mass anti-government protests. Formally, protesters called for 'free and fair elections' and for ending the rule of the current prime minister, in power since the 1990s. Due to their timing, however, the protests were also perceived as '[pro-Russian and anti-NATO in nature](#)' and were additionally 'fuelled' by NATO's invitation. In May 2016, the Montenegrin parliament [approved a government reshuffle](#) as part of EU-backed negotiations with the opposition to organise 'free and fair elections' in October 2016. The opposition, supported by Russia, [called for a referendum](#) on NATO and launched an [online petition](#). The government responded that there is [no constitutional obligation](#) to that end and the elections would be a 'de-facto plebiscite on NATO membership'.

Russia's reaction

Russia considers NATO enlargement a [primary threat](#). In November 2015, it adopted a statement that [strongly opposed](#) Montenegro's membership as inevitably affecting its interests in this strategically important region. After the launch of the invitation, Russia announced it would take counter-measures and [warned](#) that its relations with NATO may get more complicated. While [energy](#) is the dominant issue in the region's relations with Russia, in Montenegro this is also coupled with strong [economic clout](#): Russia owns a big share of the foreign companies, accounts for nearly a third of foreign direct investment and brings significant revenue to [tourism](#). This raises the stakes for Montenegro in case Russia decides to put economic pressure on it. Despite this, in 2014, Montenegro joined EU sanctions against Russia; the forthcoming autumn elections are said to create an [opportunity for Russia to interfere](#) in response to this move.

NATO's new member: pros and cons

The Euro-Atlantic perspective is widely [acknowledged as important](#) for the region's stabilisation. In that sense, Montenegro's NATO bid is considered positive for boosting regional stability and cooperation, including by its neighbours. Serbia is also [not expected to oppose](#) Montenegro's accession. Oft-cited downsides include the [bureaucratic overload](#) related to integrating new members, as well as Montenegro's potentially [limited](#) military contribution to NATO in absolute terms. There are concerns that admitting Montenegro could [undermine](#) NATO's commitment to democratic values, keeping in mind problems related to the rule of law, institution-building and the fight on corruption. On the other hand, supporters claim that membership would require ongoing efforts towards the country's wider reform process, which NATO would continue to uphold. Joining NATO would thus be good for Montenegro's EU bid and is expected to serve as a '[stepping stone](#)' for it. The perception that it would make Montenegro a more credible partner for other countries and foreign investors, creating ground for economic development, is also seen as an asset.

In its [2016 resolution](#) on the European Commission's 2015 Montenegro report, the European Parliament welcomed NATO's decision to invite Montenegro to join the Alliance, and recalled that EU accession negotiations are independent from the NATO accession process. It congratulated Montenegro's full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy, as well as the adoption of the law on the implementation of international restrictive measures, including in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea. It encouraged other countries in the region to follow suit.