



***Balkans Post:* How do you see the consequences of Montenegro's membership in NATO for the broader region?**

NATO continues to creep eastward, now hosting thousands of troops in Latvia, a clear provocation against Russia, which has no claims on it or anyone else. **Slovenia** is a member since 2004,

Bu

Igaria

and

Romania

are members since 2007,

Albania

joined in 2009, and

Croatia

in 2013. (Bosnia and Macedonia are still pending.)

Montenegro joined in June 2017, despite strong opposition. The parliamentary vote was boycotted by the main opposition and hundreds demonstrated outside. The country is a mix of Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians and Croats, with two thirds of the population Muslim. Serbian is still the majority language. Montenegro's truly multicultural make-up allowed it to survive the break-up of Yugoslavia relatively unscathed, unlike Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia.

It has a small military of about 2,000 troops, but is strategically positioned to give NATO full control over the Adriatic Sea. The other Adriatic nations – Albania, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy – are already in the alliance, so NATO is delighted, if not the Montenegrins.

Montenegro's pro-Europe crowd clearly see NATO membership as helping to usher it into the

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Written by Eric Walberg Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг ██████ ██████
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more important membership in the EU. Spurning NATO would not help it join the European cash cow. There is no defence advantage for Montenegro, which weathered the Yugoslav break-up relatively unscathed, and has no border problems. But as a postmodern state, Montenegro can't pretend it has any foreign policy, so it might as well raise the white flag and hope for some crumbs from the NATO table.

How do you evaluate the presence of US and Russia in the region?

Trump's election does not portend any new interest in or major change for the Balkans. The NATOphiles in the US are out of favour. Trump clearly approves of the doubters like Pfaff, and is interested in asserting US power unilaterally, with NATO members joining the chorus and paying up.

The centrepiece of US Balkan policy has been Kosovo, created by the US under Clinton, boasting the largest NATO based in Europe at Camp Steel, but it has not advanced much beyond a narco-state. The Balkans are no longer central to US policy to transform Europe. Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci sees the writing on the wall, and has said that Kosovo and Russia should establish direct relationships, however unlikely that is.

Russia has traditionally been the natural ally of the Christian Balkans, both before and after the 1917 Russian revolution, as an ally against the Ottomans and then the Nazis and during the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a political and economic vacuum that the US and EU were quick to seize, though Russia is slowly returning as a player in the region.

Territorial integrity

There appears to be a Trump-Putin gentleman's agreement over spheres of influence in Europe. Both are realists, and Putin has more or less given up on the Balkans. At the same time, Trump is less of a risky "deep state" gambler like Clinton-Obama. Russia stood helplessly as NATO bombed Serbia in 1999, and did not support mass protests in Macedonia and Montenegro just as it did not support mass protests in Odessa, Mykolaiv and Kharkov following the 2014 coup in Ukraine. Despite bogus criticisms of Russia as the aggressor, its bottom line policy in the region is to support territorial integrity of existing states. It is too weak to do otherwise.

The momentum of NATO/EU accession has been accepted by Russia in the Balkans, but not in Ukraine. Russia's 'bottom line' was violated in Kosovo and it will remain an eyesore, a 'frozen conflict', for years to come. When its bottom line was threatened closer to home, Russia came to the defence of beleaguered Russian Ukrainians. The Donetsk, Kharkiv and Lugansk rebels, faced with gross violations of basic civil rights, declared independence after the 2014 coup in Kiev. But Russia did not send in troops, insists on negotiations, and would like to maintain Ukraine's territorial integrity. Here is yet another 'frozen conflict'. This should not be challenged by Trump.

Kosovo and Ukraine are just stains in the finishing touches still being put to post-1991 US hegemony. The Russians will try to maintain influence in Serbia, Srpska and Montenegro,

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where there is no unanimity on either the EU or a Russian alliance, but this is merely normal 'modern state' foreign policy. Russia is fundamentally weak, crippled by its collapse in 1991 and facing sanctions by the US and Europe since 2014. It can provide little support for anti-NATO/EU forces. Russians and the Balkan Slavs are left with only nostalgia for socialism and pan-Slavism, both enduring, but not of much significance in the hard, cold reality of neoliberalism.

Eurasian common market

Logically, all of Europe, including the Balkans and Russia, should be part of a Eurasian economic space. This is foreshadowed in China's Silk Road project, a multipolar rail and pipeline network connecting China, central Asia and Europe, and Russian ongoing gas and oil pipelines to Europe. The Balkans are not major actors here, but are strategically located, and are returning to their traditional position as the crossroads between Europe and Asia, increasingly part of the new Eurasia (whether the US/ NATO like it or not).

What the new Cold War with Russia is intended for is to keep this Eurasian EU-Russia-China-India-Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Turkey common market from uniting as the new countervailing force to US imperialism.

EU - one size fits all

The milk is split. The state structures of the hard won Yugoslav socialist federation are no more. The Balkans are helpless in the face of neoliberalism, and the EU and NATO provide the only way forward for them—at present. At least by cementing the statelets as postmodern nations, NATO membership should prevent Albanian revanchists from launching a war to regain Albanian populations in Macedonia and Kosovo, and should keep Croats and Serbians from lashing out at each other.

Other than that, NATO is really irrelevant, despite its shiny headquarters in Brussels and its 29 members (and still counting). It is the EU that holds the promise of western materialism and freedom to live and work abroad, and that will continue to shape the Balkans, replacing its rich history and culture with a Euro stamp. At this point, Thatcher's TINA (there is no alternative) holds.

The collapse of the Soviet Union expanded the EU dramatically. Ten central European countries joined by 2007, **Slovenia** the first Balkan state (2004), and **Croatia** the latest (2013). The EU, as a collection of postmodern nations, has never been a strong voice in international affairs, and was transformed, like NATO, into a looser and hence weaker union of now 28 states, where foreign policy is decided in Washington (OK, Brussels gets to sign off and even mildly dissent). The EU is a more serious organization than NATO, affecting citizens directly, requiring major economic reforms, unlike NATO, which requires almost nothing of new members except open doors for NATO to rearrange and incorporate a few thousand military personnel.

The messy disintegration of Yugoslavia is best overcome through the EU. The remaining

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Balkan states are lined up for EU accession negotiations, but no new admissions will be considered till 2019. "The western Balkan countries have an unequivocal European perspective," boasts Jean-Claude Juncker, the head of the European Commission which is leading membership negotiations with Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia. Millions of Balkaners would disagree with "unequivocal", and the EU has lost its sheen. It is also suffering a messy disintegration.

NATO is a paper tiger, more a sign of US prestige and European irrelevance, where member states pay homage to the US as world hegemon, still very much a 'modern' nation. It is the EU that holds the economic cards, and where the future of the Balkans now lies—until the Eurasia project takes off.

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