

INTEROPERABILITY AND ACCESSION TO NATO – THE CASE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Dražen Smiljanić *

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ABSTRACT

The article examines interoperability as a critical condition for accession to NATO. We distinguish between two fundamental types of interoperability, political and military, and discuss their specific nature and significance in conditioning accession to NATO. In applying the concept of interoperability, we reviewed the achievements of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) on the path towards NATO membership. We identify specific political conditions that have caused the lagging of BiH's fully-fledged membership. The case of BiH shows that, despite substantial progress achieved by the state's defence sector in approaching NATO, the political process is stalled due to incompatible views and rhetoric among BiH's main entities. Since a country joins NATO as a whole and not only with its military, BiH's progress towards NATO exists within the context of Western reluctance and concerns. In conclusion, BiH's example shows that, given the nature of NATO as a political and military alliance and the significance of sharing common values among its members, political interoperability outweighs military interoperability, rendering BiH a hostage of ethnonationalist politics.

Keywords: NATO, Bosnia and Herzegovina, interoperability

1. INTRODUCTION

Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO, 2023a) states that any European country is eligible to join NATO. However, the main requirement for any applicant is that they are in "*a position to further the principles*" of the founding 1949 Washington Treaty and to "*contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area*". The principles stated in the first paragraph of the Treaty include "*democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law*", as well as a determination to "*promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area.*" These principles did not require further ex-

* Dr. sc. Dražen Smiljanić, colonel of the army and research fellow. Acting director of the Institute for Security and Defence Studies, University of Defence and Security, Zagreb. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5759-7683

planation during the Cold War, when the division between eligible and non-eligible states was delineated by the “iron curtain”. Most importantly, countries ruled by the monopoly of the communist party were automatically deemed non-eligible. The situation changed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union when NATO needed to redefine its purpose and core tasks. Even though the main threat to the North Atlantic area, the Soviet Union, disappeared, eastern and south-eastern European countries showed a clear interest in NATO membership, considering it the central pillar of their security architecture.

This new reality created additional criteria for the “transitional” aspirant countries, mostly post-communist, eastern and south-eastern European nations, which needed to undergo necessary reforms, primarily within their security sectors. This is why NATO established the Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process (PARP) to guide and evaluate progress in defence and military transformation, modernisation efforts, along with the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for aspirant countries. MAP aims to provide “advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance” (NATO, 2023e). While MAP represents a valuable tool for guiding a country’s transformation, it does not predetermine NATO membership. Thus, accession to NATO still depends on criteria, sometimes implicit, which are assessed at the discretion of the allies.

This article aims to scrutinise the criteria for NATO membership, describing them as “interoperability” requirements, focusing mainly on technical (i.e. military) and political interoperability aspects.

We first provide a review of the criteria required for NATO membership, problematising the lack of “fixed standards”. This leads to the subsequent chapter, in which we offer modelling criteria for full membership, viewing interoperability as the connective tissue for all requirements. The concept of interoperability is then examined through the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s (BiH) path towards NATO membership, explicitly emphasising the political aspects. To reach these objectives, we predominantly used qualitative analysis of secondary sources, supplemented by quantitative analysis when listing the goals and achievements of BiH.

2. NATO MEMBERSHIP – THE CONCERT OF VALUES

2.1. NATO – the guarantor of collective defence and “the way of life”

NATO is considered the world’s most successful and undoubtedly the most robust military-political organisation. Its importance for the security of Western Europe during the Cold War continued in securing European order throughout the 1990s. However, the relevance of the Alliance was questioned after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and NATO has struggled with various doubts about its purpose. Despite criticism, NATO continued to be the cornerstone of collective defence in the Euro-Atlantic area during the post-Cold War period. The Alliance has expanded

dramatically over the decades, growing from its original 12 allies in 1949 to 32 by 2024, with the accession of Sweden.

Arguably, the most compelling reason for countries to join NATO is its “security umbrella”, as reflected in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, NATO’s founding document. The article outlines the mutual defence promise: *“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all”* (NATO, 2023a). However, Article 5 is often believed to guarantee automatic military defence for any ally. This article obliges a member to be committed to *“assist”* and to take *“such action as it deems necessary”* to restore or maintain security in the North Atlantic area. The nature of the response, however, may or may not include the use of armed forces.

In addition to collective defence, NATO is considered the protector of the Western way of life, which is the de facto standard of liberal democracies and the post-WW2 world order. Former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower formulated it explicitly in 1954: *“We do not keep security establishments merely to defend property or territory or rights abroad or at sea. We keep the security forces to defend a way of life”* (NATO, 2022). Arguably, defending the common “way of life” requires allies to share values and standards that take priority over the material dimension, expressed in defence capabilities. While burden-sharing and allies’ contribution to NATO’s military instrument of power represent inherently subjective and political issues among allies, NATO does not primarily converge around economic aspects (for more on the economic theory of alliances, see Mancur & Zeckhauser, 1966).

In 2024, NATO, comprising 32 members, represents an international organisation consisting of some of the world’s most economically prosperous, technologically advanced, socially modern, and democratic countries. Moreover, NATO represents a transatlantic bond between countries on the European and North American continents. NATO’s strength consequently stems from the combination of the military and economic power of the USA, along with the aggregated political and economic power of Europe and its military potential. This potential renders NATO relevant in providing security for almost 1 billion people.

Member nations consider NATO both a political and military alliance (NATO, 2024). This is because the purpose of the alliance is to guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means. The Alliance strives to secure lasting peace in the Euro-Atlantic region but is not rooted only in the military dimension. Its political aspect is an overarching framework that binds its cohesion. NATO’s cohesion stems from shared values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

2.2. NATO accession – who can join?

NATO accession is a two-way process. Membership in NATO is considered a privilege within the community of countries sharing fundamental values. However, the Alliance is open to those who satisfy certain conditions. NATO is also interested in promoting security and may encourage specific European nations to join the Alliance (see more in Brooke-Holland, 2023a; Brooke-Holland, 2023b).

NATO's "open door" policy

NATO's "open door" policy, outlined in Article 10 of the Treaty, allows any European country to be eligible for membership. Since 1999, aspiring members have used individually tailored Membership Action Plans to prepare for membership and to implement any required political, legal, military or security reforms. A formal invitation to join is extended with the unanimous consent of all NATO members, after which each Ally must sign and ratify the Accession Protocol. The ratification process follows each member's national procedures and may therefore take several months. Only after the completion of the ratification does the applicant country formally join the Alliance.

There are three critical substantive requirements for accession to the Alliance set out in Article 10 of the Washington Treaty:

- Membership is open to European states.
- NATO enlargement requires unanimous Agreement.
- The state must be *"in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area"*¹.

However, there is no obligation to join. NATO clearly respects the right of every country to choose its security arrangements. Article 13 of the Treaty gives Allies the right to leave should they wish to.

Conditions for NATO membership

As stated in Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO, 2023a), the main requirement for any applicant seeking NATO membership is that they must be in a position to further the principles of the founding Washington Treaty and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area. Since 1999, aspiring members have used individually tailored Membership Action Plans to prepare for membership and to implement any political, legal, military, or security reforms required.

All members of NATO must unanimously agree to invite an aspiring country to join. This initiates the accession process, which involves each member of the Alliance signing and ratifying the Accession Protocol. The ratification process varies

¹ North Atlantic Treaty, Article 10: *"The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty."*

according to each member's national procedures. Only after the completion of the ratification process can the applicant country formally join the Alliance.

The US Department of State listed minimum requirements for candidates aspiring for membership in NATO (US DoS, 1997):

1. New members must uphold democracy, including tolerating diversity.
2. New members must be making progress toward a market economy.
3. Their military forces must be under firm civilian control.
4. They must be good neighbours and respect sovereignty outside their borders.
5. They must be working toward compatibility with NATO forces.

However, it is stated that while these criteria are essential, they do not automatically guarantee NATO membership.

This list also outlines the specific "areas of interoperability" that a candidate must satisfy to join the Alliance. From the above list, we may derive the following areas:

- Political: criteria 1, 3 and 4
- Economic and social: criterion 2
- Military: criterion 5.

Generally, however, this can be aggregated into two main areas: political (including criteria 1, 2, 3 and 4, and military, including criterion 5).

Similarly, NATO's *Study on NATO Enlargement* (NATO, 2008), first published in 2005, lists the desired requirements that NATO aspirants must fulfil. These include (1) commitment to collective defence and the preservation of peace and security (essentially, peaceful behaviour in international relations); (2) contribution to the development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening free institutions; and (3) sharing of roles, risks, responsibilities and costs (i.e. burden sharing), along with the benefits of ensuring common security goals and objectives. However, even these criteria are not a "fixed or rigid list of criteria for inviting new member states to join the Alliance." Ultimately, it is up to the discretion of the allies to "decide by consensus whether to invite each new member to join according to their judgment of whether doing so will contribute to security and stability in the North Atlantic area at the time such a decision is to be made" (NATO, 2008).

NATO is neither an ordinary military coalition nor a loose alliance like that of the great Allied powers during WW2². Bound together by shared values, NATO's membership after the Cold War was conditioned by various requirements for countries aspiring to join, especially those from Eastern and Southeast Europe, which needed a thorough transformation of their political and defence institutions. NATO's decision-makers consider that the organisation's strength lies in the aggregate sum

² In World War II, the three great Allied powers – Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union – formed a Grand Alliance that was the key to victory. However, the alliance members did not share common political aims and did not always agree on how the war should be fought.

of its military, political, and economic power, as well as its ability to reach decisions through consensus, solidarity, and a commitment to protecting shared values. Consequently, NATO is not only “the community of the strongest” but rather “the community of the similar”. With shared values at its core, it may be deduced that cohesion among members around those values and principles represents NATO’s centre of gravity. This idea is often reflected in narratives and strategic communication (see, for example, NATO JFTC, 2022).

The US military associates the centre of gravity with “a source of power” (US JCS, 2020: GL-6), while NATO doctrine defines it as “an entity”. This includes “a strong political leader, a religious leader or organisation wielding decisive political power, a ruling elite, and a strong-willed population (or a segment of it) determined to prevail” (NATO, 2019: B-2). In addition, NATO considers the power of will as its centre of gravity, which is directly connected with its cohesion (unity of effort).

Understanding this uniqueness of NATO helps us comprehend why NATO membership necessitates a proven set of satisfied requirements and “interoperable” instruments of national power.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – MILITARY AND POLITICAL INTEROPERABILITY

Stacy Baird (2009) views interoperability as necessarily embedded in the “interoperability ecosystem”, recognising its five facets:

1. Technical interoperability (which generally focuses on designing products that need to be interoperable);
2. Organisational interoperability (focusing on business processes and user-based adoption issues to facilitate efficiencies across organisations);
3. Legal/public policy interoperability (i.e., laws and public policies affecting interoperability among government entities and organisations, such as accessibility, privacy, security, etc.);
4. Semantic interoperability (i.e., assurance that all systems and users “speak the same language” and understand each other);
5. The impact of differing political, economic, cultural and social forces on interoperability.

Although NATO does not define interoperability to such a broad extent, it is evident that, in practice, all five facets are relevant and applied. Technical interoperability pertains to military interoperability (i.e. interoperability of defence capabilities). Organisational interoperability implies common standards in shaping defence organisation and forces. Legal/public interoperability applies to the rules of engagement, document classification, etc. Semantic interoperability is a primary focus of NATO’s Standardization Agency. Finally, political, economic, cultural and social paradigms are essential for developing the frameworks and policies necessary for interaction among allies.

3.1. Military interoperability

The NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (NATO, 2013) provides three definitions of interoperability. Two of them, military interoperability (NATO, 2013: 2-M-6) and force interoperability (NATO, 2013:3-I-5), essentially share the same definition of interoperability, described as "*the ability of military forces to train, exercise and operate effectively together in the execution of assigned missions and tasks.*"

The "purpose" of military interoperability is to enable forces, units, and systems to operate together by facilitating communication and sharing common doctrine, procedures, and each other's infrastructure and bases. Interoperability is also vital for efficiency as it reduces duplication, enables the pooling of resources and produces synergies among all members and, whenever possible, with NATO partner countries (NATO, 2023b).

Interoperability is also considered NATO's added value to the Alliance's defence planning process. It ensures the ability of various military forces to work together effectively, even if they originate from different countries or organisations. Interoperability is critical for NATO's ability to respond to security challenges and threats effectively. It allows member states to pool their resources and capabilities and to act as a unified force, strengthening NATO's collective defence and deterrence posture.

According to NATO's approach, interoperability can have multiple dimensions (see more at NATO, 2023b):

- Technical (including hardware, equipment, armaments and systems);
- Procedural (including doctrines and procedures);
- Human (including terminology and training); and
- Information (as a critical transversal element).

Technical interoperability does not necessarily require standardised (unified) military equipment. Still, it allows equipment to share common facilities and interact, connect, communicate, and exchange data and services with other equipment.

3.2. Political interoperability

The third definition of interoperability in the NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (NATO, 2013) is broader, describing it as "*the ability to act together coherently, effectively and efficiently to achieve Allied tactical, operational and strategic objectives*" (NATO, 2013:2-I-8; NATO, 2023b). Although the glossary does not explicitly state it, the ability to act together in achieving strategic objectives requires what may be called "political interoperability".

When launching the reflection process on NATO's future role, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg outlined three priorities to frame his vision of NATO 2030: NATO must "*stay strong militarily, be more united politically, and take a broader approach globally*" (NATO, 2020).

This political unity can only be established based on the shared common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law (NATO, 2023c). Consequently, interoperability cannot be restricted solely to military matters. Political unity is essential for reaching a consensus, which is how decisions are made in NATO (NATO, 2023d). For NATO to succeed in the consensual decision-making model, policymakers and working groups from different nations must work together, share common goals and values, and be willing to cooperate towards achieving them.

However, democracy has not always been a requirement for NATO membership. One of the first signatories was Portugal, led by Antonio Salazar, who, while not explicitly fascist, could be considered a right-wing dictator (Kardum, 2023). Another example is Greece after the *coup d'état* in 1967, led by Colonel Geórgios Papadopoulos, who later served as prime minister and president until 1973 (Varoufakis, 2024), while a military junta governed until 1974. In addition, cohesion within NATO has always been an ideal because, in reality, relations between Turkey and Greece have been far from idyllic, especially after Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974.

While the cases of Portugal and Greece may be understood within the context of a bipolar world, where allies were those not behind “the Iron Curtain”, Turkey stands out as an exception among most other members today. Freedom House ranks Turkey as NATO’s most undemocratic member, with a score of 32 points (placing it behind Jordan, Uganda and Tanzania) and earning the status of “not free” (Freedomhouse, 2024; Rubin, 2024). Turkey, and partly Hungary, often creates dissonance within NATO today (recent examples include discussions relating to the accession of Sweden), highlighting the significance of “political unity” within NATO.

4. SPECIFICS OF THE ACCESSION PROCESS TO NATO IN BIH

4.1. BiH – a historical perspective and path towards NATO

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s state space has traversed various state-political structures throughout its history, from medieval times through the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian periods, the interwar era in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the wartime period within the Independent State of Croatia, the post-war era in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, to its status as an independent, internationally recognised Republic in 1992. During these epochs, its society experienced longer and shorter periods of war and peace, continuity and discontinuity in its statehood, as well as times of progress, stagnation, and deep crises.

In the distribution of political interests in the Balkans, the contemporary territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina were of interest to its neighbours and, from time to time, to the great powers. These included the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German Empire, the Russian Empire and, to a lesser degree, the Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Italy. As a result, the region bore the name “powder keg of Europe” or “Balkan powder keg”, which characterised the Balkans in the early part of the 20th Century, preceding World War I. The territory of today’s BiH has not

been an example of stability since Ban Kulin's religious freedom policy in the 12th Century (New World Encyclopedia, 2023). Historian Pieter Geyl famously coined the proverb of history being "*a discussion without end*" (Geyl, 1958), which rings particularly true when analysing the tumultuous history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After WWII, Bosnia and Herzegovina became one of the republics in socialist Yugoslavia, serving as its geographical and strategic centre. People in Bosnia and Herzegovina were renowned for their hospitality, generosity and friendliness. However, one of the most sensitive issues was the national (ethnic) question, which, during the communist period, was attempted to be overcome by promoting the ideal of brotherhood and unity. But these ideals collapsed with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the antagonisms escalated during the 1992–1995 war, revealing the vulnerability of Bosnian society.

An attempt to save the communist system remained one of the goals pursued by conservative political and military elites in Serbia, including the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), who believed they could preserve the Yugoslav state and achieve Serbian unification within one country (Pestic, 1996). In his book on national questions in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, Professor Banac concluded that Yugoslavia and democracy could not coexist (Banac, 1984; Banac, 1992). Specifically, the entire Yugoslav project, which had been upheld and maintained by communist methods of governance since WW2, collapsed. Rising ethnocentrism made it impossible to substitute it with democracy as a state-wide model.

Ethnocentrism and ethnopolitics (see more in Carmichael, 2012) in the late 1980s and early 1990s became fuels that accelerated the demise of Yugoslavia. In BiH, ethnic divisions became *de facto*, which later conditioned the country's constitution. The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects the arrangements stated in the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also known as the Dayton Peace Agreement (UN Peacemaker, 1995). The Agreement was initiated on 21 November 1995 in Dayton, USA, and signed in Paris on 14 December 1995. It was created as a result of peace negotiations, and its most significant value and success lie in its role as an effective means of ending the horrors of war in BiH. However, the international negotiators at Dayton assumed that the country required a strict interpretation of consociationalism³, which is precisely how the country's government is arranged constitutionally (Bildt, 1999, 392). This means that the primary state-political institutions are structured according to the principle of proportionality and parity in the ethnical representation of the three autochthonous ethnic constituents: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats.

The importance of the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina is manifold. Firstly, it succeeded in ending the four-year war and preserved the integrity and international legal subjectivity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Secondly, it incorporated the adoption of BiH's Constitution as an integral part, establishing the internal organisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is based on two entities.

³ See more on the consociationalist model in BiH in Kasapović, 2005 i McCulloch, 2009.

The implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement is based on the involvement of international community forces, both military and civilian. This includes NATO military and civilian personnel, with the high representative of the international community serving as the supreme authority for interpreting and implementing the Agreement. Specifically, military implementation is defined in Annex 1A, known as the "Agreement on Military Aspects of the Peace Settlement." Its Article 8 is dedicated to the Establishment of a Joint Military Commission, which "*shall be established with the deployment of the IFOR to Bosnia and Herzegovina.*"

In theoretical and other discussions, two opinions stand out as dominant regarding what the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) made possible for Bosnia and Herzegovina. One opinion argues that the DPA is a peaceful agreement that resolved the issue of war by ending it. It created the basis for the internal integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, allowed for the establishment of democratic institutions, facilitated the consolidation of peace, and initiated the process of approaching Euro-Atlantic integration.

Another opinion claims that the Dayton Peace Agreement divided Bosnia and Herzegovina along ethnic lines, as ethnic principles have become predominant in the internal organisation and functioning of the state. In addition, Bosnia and Herzegovina has become a complex and expensive country. It consists of two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (organised into 10 autonomous cantons) and Republika Srpska, along with one self-governing administrative unit, District Brčko. Furthermore, BiH functions with 14 parliaments. As a result, services dominate the country's economy, generating about two-thirds of GDP and accounting for more than half of total employment. This is mainly due to the substantial size of the public sector and a high share of the internal trade and distribution sector (EC, 2019: 4).

The fact is that the DPA acknowledged the wartime division of the country as a consequence of the use of organised force. The Agreement also granted the international community enormous extra-institutional powers and created a favourable environment for ethno-nationalist political parties to maintain the power they had established at the beginning of the 1990s and solidified during the war in BiH from 1992 to 1995. The DPA created a new political reality, a state comprising two entities, the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska, encompassing three mono-ethnic geopolitical units, along with their respective armed and police forces. Consequently, the country only partially met the standards of *de jure* statehood. Referred to as "Daytonian BiH", it began with a defined state territory, a permanent population, and international recognition, but with shared sovereignty (Turčalo & Kapidžić, 2014).

Discussions surrounding two polarised opinions often generate the idea of the necessity for extending the Dayton Peace Agreement. This extension would hypothetically aim to establish the basis for the functional organisation of the state, similar to that of European Union member states. However, the realisation of this idea remains far from achieving consensus, both within the international community and among the political forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Pejanović, 2005; Pejanović, 2021).

The state-building process in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its path towards NATO membership commenced under external guidance. The implementation of the DPA included engagement from the international community, and, in the first years after its signing, was ensured by an international actor that deployed 60,000 IFOR soldiers organised into three multinational divisions deployed in Tuzla (Multinational Division North, led by the United States of America), Banja Luka (Multinational Division Southwest, led by Great Britain) and Mostar (Multinational Division Southeast, led by France). Operation IFOR (Implementation Force), conducted under NATO code "Operation Joint Endeavour", lasted from 20 December 1995 to 20 December 1996. From 21 December 1996, NATO forces continued to operate under the name Stabilization Force – SFOR. This name change marked a partial shift in mandate (from implementation to stabilisation). SFOR functioned under the code "Operation Joint Guard" from 21 December 1996 to 19 June 1998 and subsequently operated under the name "Operation Joint Forge" from 20 June 1998 to 2 December 2004. The period of internationally-led state-building in BiH extended from late 1997 to mid-2006 and was headed by the Office of the High Representative (OHR).

Arguably, only thanks to these developments did Bosnia and Herzegovina survive within its pre-war borders (the so-called AVNOJ⁴ borders), which served as the basis for delimitation after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. These AVNOJ republican borders were the main topic of dispute during Yugoslavia's dissolution (ICTY, 2014). After the wars in the 1990s, BiH underwent a shift in the political climate regarding NATO and EU integration.

4.2. NATO and the Western Balkans – a marriage of convenience

Both NATO and the EU have supported the Western Balkans countries in their respective processes of post-authoritarian democratisation, transition to market economies, and post-conflict reconstruction. The enlargement perspective has played, and still plays, a vital role in regional stabilisation processes.

According to today's taxonomy, the Western Balkans consist of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia. The EU considers all of them as prospective candidates for accession to the European Union and therefore refers to them as "enlargement countries" (EC, 2020).

In the 2000s, the general public in the Western Balkans countries was generally uninformed about the cost-benefit ratio of NATO membership. This includes the perceived cost of updating defence systems to meet NATO standards against the actual and psychological benefits of higher perceived security. These countries often calculate a tactical benefit to NATO membership, considering it a stepping stone for EU membership. Nevertheless, the main advantages of NATO membership are reduced security concerns, lower defence costs compared to individual national de-

⁴ Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, which decided on the borders of the future, post-WW2 Yugoslavia on 29 November 1943, in Jajce, BiH.

fence, support available for modernising and transforming the armed forces, and the encouraging signals that NATO membership sends to foreign investors (Grim, 2008).

Regarding BiH, the accession process was greatly inspired during the visit of former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson to BiH in 2001. He pointed to the reforms needed for BiH to begin the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. Lord Robertson (NATO SFOR, 2001) detailed the list of requirements specific to BiH:

"A common security policy, democratic parliamentary oversight and control of the armed forces, the provision at a state level of command and control of the armed forces, including a state level ministry responsible for defence matters, full transparency for plans and budgets, and development of a common doctrine and common standards to train and equip the armed forces of this country. There are, of course, other political conditions which are also self-evident, but our message today to the Tri-Presidency was a very simple one - Show leadership, lead on overcoming internal divisions, strengthen state-level institutions, promote cooperation and reconciliation and root out crime and corruption that have links to political nationalism."

In a particular aspect, this statement sends a strong message of what may be understood as requirements for political interoperability with NATO.

4.3. Complicated political geography of BiH

Divisions characterise the contemporary political landscape in BiH. Even when formally supporting the Daytonian framework, actors on the political stage often emphasise physical borders along ethnic lines as given. One rally held in October 2023 in Donja Sopotnica (Novo Goražde) in Republika Srpska is a symptomatic example of that mindset. People formally gathered to support the political leadership of Republika Srpska and the Dayton Agreement under the motto "Border exists" (RTRS, 2023).

The question of BiH's accession to NATO has also lost consensus among the constitutive elements of the state. This is particularly the case with the leadership of Republika Srpska, which maintains close ties with official Belgrade. The president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has repeatedly declared his opposition to NATO membership. He has also frequently used narratives highlighting tendencies to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina. An additional feature of Republika Srpska is its political orientation, which does not favour the EU and instead leans towards Russia. At a Christmas reception for the 3rd Infantry Unit of the Bosnian Armed Forces in January 2014, Dodik explained that the country's NATO accession would establish a borderline of the North Atlantic Alliance on the Drina River. Considering Serbia's military neutrality, he claimed that Republika Srpska authorities do not want to make this possible. He added, *"I will never vote in favour of BiH's NATO accession, both as RS president and when I retire, I will not forget that NATO bombed Serbs with depleted uranium"* (Tanjug, 2014).

Dodik's anti-NATO rhetoric has lasted for years and remains present. On 9 January 2023, he awarded Russian President Vladimir Putin, *in absentia*, the entity's highest honour for his "*patriotic concern and love for Republika Srpska*" (Euronews, 2023). The honour was bestowed on the 31st anniversary of the creation of the entity. Dodik also claimed that the time had come again for "*all Serbs united in a single state*," a slogan used by leaders of Greater Serbia's ethnonationalist project at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. It was also part of Slobodan Milosevic's political propaganda, contributing to the joint criminal enterprise to ethnically cleanse large areas of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (La Brosse, 2003). Regarding moving closer to NATO accession, the government of Republika Srpska blocks reforms and measures not only with its rhetoric but also activities such as registering military property (Benyon, 2017).

An additional aspect of the complexities of the country's constitution could be seen in the election of Željko Komšić, an ethnic Croat, as the Croat representative on the Bosnian state presidency. The Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, Bosnia's main Croatian party, has long claimed that Komšić won the seat on the state presidency thanks to the votes of Bosniaks (Vladisavljevic, 2018). Although Komšić formally represents Bosnia's Croats in the Bosnian Presidency, since 2018, many Croats say he owes his victory to the votes of the much larger Bosniak, or Muslim, community. Criticism regarding the legitimacy of Komšić's election also comes from the Croatian President and Prime Minister (Badovinac, 2022).

The complicated political landscape shows that even more than twenty years after the visit of NATO officials to BiH, the situation reflects the words of Lord Robertson:

"The future of this country is in the hands of the people of this country. But there are still too many people living in the past. They hinder the development of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state, and they contribute to perpetuating ethnic division and lasting animosity" (NATO SFOR, 2001).

The West still identifies significant ethnic and sectarian tensions as causes that continue to undermine economic reforms and efforts to cope with severe governance problems. These issues are arguably rooted both in the complexities of the country's constitution and the lack of goodwill among some of the country's leaders to make government work (Benyon, 2017). An additional specificity of BiH is that Serbia and Croatia have substantial political influence on BiH. That is because a significant Serbian and/or Croatian population (ethnicity) lives in BiH, and both countries are signatories of the DPA. While Croatia supports BiH's Euro-Atlantic future, Serbia does not support the process. This is demonstrated in the political statements and decisions by both Serbs in BiH and Serbia (Prelejić, 2017).

4.4. Transformation of the defence and military sector according to NATO standards

In 1995, as the war came to an end, BiH formally had two armed forces: the Federation of BiH Armed Forces (FBiH AF) and the Republika Srpska Armed Forces. However, the FBiH AF was deeply divided along ethnic lines (Croats and Bosniaks), effectively making BiH's armed forces a mixture of three ethnically divided groups: Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks (Katica, 2008). The post-war period saw a country with approximately 400,000 soldiers, conscripted in all three armed forces, lacking democratic control of the security sector, and facing contradictory political agendas from the three ruling parties.

This forced the international community to realise the need to prioritise security sector reform and reorganise the armed forces to prevent a possible renewal of violence. The international engagement in BiH aims to instill the ideals of liberal democracy through a framework of institutional standards. The primary focus was inducing compliance with Western standards through institutional reform. In this sense, activities undertaken on the road towards NATO integration, if pursued fully by all political actors, might be a significant stepping stone in achieving sustainable peace in BiH.

Simultaneously, BiH undertook several vital steps to satisfy the primary conditions on the road towards NATO's fully-fledged membership. This includes participation in Peacekeeping Missions, developing fairly stable relations with neighbouring countries, and cooperation with International Criminal Tribunal for War Crimes in the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Katica, 2008).

Regarding progress in the security sector, in 2003, OHR established the first Defence Reform Commission (DRC), tasked with developing a strategy for a single defence structure. The DRC proposed restructuring the two existing armies to form the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH), with a single operational chain of command and a single administrative structure. The second Defence Reform Commission recommended "*the creation of a single defence establishment and single military force in Bosnia and Herzegovina under fully functioning state-level command and control*" (DRC, 2005: 1). This effort was part of the Planning and Review Process (PARP) and was successfully implemented.

The accession of BiH to the Partnership for Peace (PfP) was formalised by signing The Framework Document with NATO, submitted on 14 December 2006. The subsequent Presentation Document forms the basis for shaping the efforts of BiH, both in the implementation of the political goals of PfP and in the attempt to become a full member of NATO. The document outlines the individual PfP approach and the steps to be taken. It also represents civil and military possibilities foreseen as part of PfP activities and defines areas of cooperation in which BiH wants to participate.

BiH participates in the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP), which provides a structured basis for identifying forces and capabilities available to the Alliance for multinational training, exercises, peacekeeping, and crisis management operations.

One specific characteristic of PARP is that it allows partners to set requirements for developing their capabilities through partner goals. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a total of 40 Partnership Goals (PG). There are 17 out of those under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces (MO i OS BiH, 2020): 3 belong to the common domain, 11 belong to the land, and 3 belong to the air component.

The essential partnership goal was considered to be PGL-1100 (land), "Participation by a combat unit in the pool of NATO forces." In 2020, representatives of the NATO Joint Forces Command Naples (NATO JFCN, 2020) evaluated the Bosnia and Herzegovina Light Infantry Battalion Group (INF-L-BNG). The evaluation was part of the Operational Capabilities Concept Evaluation and Feedback (OCC E&F) programme, designed to evaluate the level of interoperability of partner units in the so-called NATO Pool of Forces. According to NATO standards, NATO evaluators assessed INF-L-BNG in several areas, including training, organisation, structure, and equipment. Through this successful evaluation, the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina proved their ability and readiness to participate in NATO operations, which is regarded as the pinnacle of their interoperability.

Further cooperation with NATO has continued within the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) since 2008, and in 2010, BiH joined the Membership Action Plan (MAP). As of January 2024, only Bosnia and Herzegovina is participating in the formal Membership Action Plan (MAP). Georgia and Ukraine have aspired to join, but neither has formally begun the process.

5. CONCLUSION

Colloquially, NATO aspiring countries must satisfy essential "interoperability" conditions, both political and military, which refer to their instruments of national power. In that framework, so-called political interoperability has proven to be more critical for the success of the NATO accession process than military interoperability. The political process ultimately governs policy and strategy development and is directly connected to decision-making at all levels (strategic, operational and tactical).

While the process of joining NATO may sometimes be burdened by the "local" or particular interests of the members (e.g., Slovenia and Croatia, Greece and North Macedonia, Turkey and Hungary in the case of Sweden), it is, in general, shaped by the readiness of the aspiring country to function as a liberal (functional) democracy, with a market economy and the rule of law. The NATO integration process of BiH has become a hostage of both the vague approach of the international community, mainly focused on technical solutions (military interoperability) and the unwillingness of ethno-political elites to collaborate and compromise.

Arguably, NATO membership for BiH was expected as a reward for successful reforms in the defence sector. Still, Bosnian political elites have consistently avoided taking responsibility for resolving the critical issues that were the main requirements for achieving a sustainable political, societal and economic process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

BiH's political geography changed mainly due to the horrors of the war in the 1990s. The lack of consensus among three main political and ethnic entities divides BiH in foreign policy outlooks, with the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina being pro-NATO and Republika Srpska against NATO. These differences strongly influence the political dialogue and the process of BiH's accession to NATO, making political conditions in BiH the main reason for the failure of accession.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, military interoperability has reached a high level, and its military has proven capable of accepting the required norms and standards. However, that was not a sufficient condition for the success of the process, especially considering an alliance such as NATO, for which the system of values and cohesion among its members represents its centre of gravity. Divided by the divergent visions of leadership of its constitutional entities, BiH has become a hostage to the past. The proclaimed vision of neutrality of the political representatives of Republika Srpska is not a convincing argument for a politics closely aligned with Serbia and, more broadly, with Putin's Russia. Consequently, in the case of BiH, this dissonance in the political arena affects not only the country's long-term political goals (e.g., membership in Euro-Atlantic associations) but also the integrity of its political institutions and processes.

The example of BiH shows that, concerning the nature of NATO as a political and military alliance, and the significance of sharing common standards and values among its members, political interoperability wins over military interoperability, making BiH a hostage to ethnonationalist politics.

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INTEROPERABILNOST I PROCES PRISTUPANJA NATO-u - STUDIJA SLUČAJA BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE

Dražen Smiljanić

SAŽETAK

U članku se razmatra interoperabilnost kao ključni uvjet za pristupanje NATO-u. Pri tome razlikujemo dvije temeljne vrste interoperabilnosti, političku i vojnu te raspravljamo o njihovoj specifičnoj prirodi i težini u uvjetovanju pristupanja NATO-u. U primjeni koncepta interoperabilnosti analizirana su postignuća Bosne i Hercegovine (BiH) na putu prema članstvu u NATO-u. U radu se problematiziraju konkretni politički uvjeti koji uzrokuju zaostajanje BiH na putu ka punopravnom članstvu NATO-a. Slučaj BiH pokazuje da je, unatoč značajnom napretku koji je državni obrambeni sektor postigao u približavanju NATO-u, politički procesi su u zastoju zbog nekompatibilnih stavova i retorike između glavnih BiH entiteta. S obzirom da država ulazi u NATO kao cjelina, a ne samo sa svojom vojskom, napredak BiH prema NATO-u egzistira između nevoljkosti i zabrinutosti Zapada. Zaključno, primjer BiH pokazuje da, s obzirom na prirodu NATO-a kao političkog i vojnog saveza te značaja dijeljenja zajedničkih vrijednosti među članicama, politička interoperabilnost ima veći značaj i prevagu nego vojna interoperabilnost, čineći BiH taocem identitetskih politika.

Ključne riječi: NATO, Bosna i Hercegovina, interoperabilnost

