

**Bosnia and Herzegovina's Prospects on Membership in the North Atlantic Treaty
Organization**

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established to push back against Russian expansion and “encourage political integration” throughout Europe.¹ In the twenty first century it is apparent now, more than ever, there is a need for practices of peace. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country located in the Balkan region of Eastern Europe that has experienced a variety of conflict and is in need of continued growth in democratic practices. Since the end of the Bosnian Civil War in 1995, NATO has played an active role in Bosnia’s government using peace-keeping forces and programs aimed at providing advice on policy reform to align with NATO’s goals. Bosnia is on track to become a member of NATO, but it is uncertain if or when that process will happen. This purpose of this research is to dive into the history between Bosnia and NATO as well as the process to membership in NATO. The likelihood of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s membership in NATO is unclear but hopefully, after developing further research on the situation, a conclusion can be drawn about Bosnia’s prospects in becoming a member of NATO.

Hypothesis and Research Question

This research paper seeks to evaluate the position of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the path to membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In doing so, it seeks to identify the history of NATO in Bosnia as well as the criteria for and steps to become a NATO member. The hypothesis proposed in this paper is that Bosnia is on the path to NATO membership but will need to see great economic, social, and defense improvements in order to qualify for NATO membership.

Research Method

The research method utilized for this paper will be qualitative research. The research for this paper is compiled primary and secondary sources and reports from NATO and its members, as well as the European Union (EU). The independent variable in this study is the current state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the dependent variable is their potential for NATO membership. This research will go through the historical background of Bosnia post-Yugoslavia dissolution and discuss its relationship with NATO, the criteria for NATO membership, and finally, the prospects of potential membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnian Civil War

Modern Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged following the Bosnian war and split of former Yugoslavia. The former Soviet Republic was home to three predominant ethnicities: 44 percent Bosniak Muslim, 31 percent Serb, 17 percent Croat, and 8 percent Yugoslav.² Among these diverse ethnicities were various religious beliefs. Ethnic nationalism was already on the rise between these predominate racial groups in the early 1990s but reached a tipping point when Bosnia’s government declared independence from Yugoslavia on April 5, 1992.³ The Bosnian Serbs, who are mostly Eastern Orthodox, were opposed to a nation with a majority of Bosniak

¹ “Kosovo, Bosnia Call for NATO Membership as War Rages in Ukraine | NATO News | Al Jazeera,” accessed December 6, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/5/nato-membership-indispensable-for-kosovo-bosnia-leaders>.

² “Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992–1995 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” accessed December 5, 2023, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/bosnia-herzegovina/1992-1995>.

³ “Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992–1995 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.”

Muslims and launched an ethnic cleansing campaign throughout the territory. This lasted for three years, until 1995, and is known as the Bosnian Civil War. Approximately eighty percent of the 100,000 people killed were Bosniak Muslims.⁴ This genocide had captured the attention of the Western world and prompted a response to the inhumane atrocities and war crimes that were being committed against the Bosniaks. Negotiations between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosniak Muslims took place in 1995 only after a NATO bombing campaign swept across the territory prompting the signing of a peace agreement known as the Dayton Peace Agreement.⁵

Dayton Peace Agreement

The Dayton Peace Agreement had a few noteworthy accomplishments. The first was establishing the boundaries of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the two political entities inside: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, comprised of the Bosniak and Croat majority, and Republika Srpska, given to the Serb majority.⁶ This was done to establish a framework for peace and security in the nation. The second that was the arrangement of the government. Due to the ethnic diversity in Bosnia, the chair of Presidency is a rotating seat. This arrangement has three elected presidents, one from each of the major ethnicities, who collectively serve for a four-year term but rotate the chair every eight months to provide equal ethnic representation.⁷ While the intention of this form of government was to unite the ethnicities, some claim that it has caused a fixed ethnic divide in government. This established the higher, top tier, form of government in Bosnia which was set to handle international, domestic, and economic issues. The second-tier form of government was established with the two states, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. The heads of these governments function under the top-tier government and handle local policy issues.⁸ This could be comparable in function to the United States' local and state governments operating in tandem. The third, and final, accomplishment this paper will highlight is the establishment of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC). The PIC included fifty-five countries and agencies that worked to support nations in the process of establishing peace through assistance with financial and military support in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹ This board helped to guide the Bosnian government in their next steps coming out of the turmoil of war. Furthermore, each of these accomplishments of the Dayton Peace Agreement worked to strengthen the relationship between Bosnia and the West: the EU, NATO, and United States.

⁴ "Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992–1995 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum."

⁵ "Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992–1995 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum."

⁶ Miscellaneous, "Dayton Peace Agreement" (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, December 14, 1995), <https://www.osce.org/bih/126173>.

⁷ "Bosnia-Herzegovina Country Profile," *BBC News*, February 29, 2012, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17211415>.

⁸ Emily Haves, "Western Balkans and the Dayton Peace Agreement," October 6, 2023, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/western-balkans-and-the-dayton-peace-agreement/>.

⁹ Haves.

NATO's Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Dayton Peace Agreement confirmed the presence of NATO in the Bosnian government. NATO had been focused on securing peace throughout Europe after World War II and the Cold War. The Balkan region was one that had experienced a good bit of the Eastern-Western tension that came across Europe after World War II. NATO had a presence in the region through peace-keeping forces shortly after the Civil War had concluded. In 2006, Bosnia and Herzegovina officially joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Program (PfP).¹⁰ This program allows partner nations to select areas for improved cooperation and work alongside NATO nations to improve. Ultimately, this program is supposed to "increase stability, diminish threat to peace and build strengthened security relationships between NATO and non-member countries in the Euro-Atlantic area."¹¹ This program directly plays into NATO's goals of creating and supporting peace and stability in Europe. Many nations that are partners with NATO through the PfP eventually work their way up to membership. One example of guidance that the PfP gave Bosnia was with their military. In 2007, Bosnia and their partner nations worked on plans to develop a professional army and reform military policy in Bosnia.¹² The improvements that came from this program allowed Bosnia to transition to the Membership Action Plan.

NATO established the Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 1999 to work on eligibility with countries that desired membership in NATO.¹³ This served as a sort of advice forum where nations could get feedback on their economic, defense/security, and social policies to ensure that they were in line with the recommendations of NATO. This is executed through submissions of Annual National Programs that detail "political, economic, defense, resource, security, and legal aspects" of a nation's policy to prepare for future membership.¹⁴ This program is designed to help nations on their path to membership but does not guarantee any membership in NATO. Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted their first Reform Program in 2019 and established the Commission for Cooperation in 2021 with NATO to implement the reforms listed in the program.¹⁵ These actions are increasing cooperation with NATO and benefiting both parties. Bosnia is able to gain support in building up their security while NATO can benefit from Bosnian forces to support NATO's peace-keeping initiatives. A practical example of this partnership can be seen in the Defense Capacity Building Package which will contribute resources to strengthening and equipping various defense and security initiatives like emergency management, cyber capabilities, and counterterrorism.¹⁶ This partnership extends beyond the military industry and also includes science and technical collaboration through civil industries. International scientific

¹⁰ NATO, "Partnership for Peace Programme," NATO, accessed December 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm.

¹¹ NATO.

¹² NATO, "Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina," NATO, accessed December 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49127.htm.

¹³ NATO, "Membership Action Plan (MAP)," NATO, accessed December 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37356.htm.

¹⁴ NATO.

¹⁵ NATO, "Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina."

¹⁶ NATO.

collaboration has benefits for the scientific community as a whole and not just for partnering nations. The increase of collaboration between Bosnia and NATO has increased the likelihood of Bosnia gaining membership in NATO.

NATO Membership

NATO has an “open-door” policy meaning that any European nation could join as long as they are able to “undertake the commitments” and duties that go along with membership while “contribut[ing] to security” in Europe.¹⁷ The process to become a member of NATO seems fairly simple on paper but, a lot of work is needed on behalf of the potential member nation in order to align their country’s policies with those of NATO. The process can be described simply as a conversation between NATO and a potential member to determine eligibility. The United States Department of State lists five criteria for member nations of NATO. The criteria are as follows: able to uphold democracy and tolerate diversity, progress in a free market economy, armed forces under civilian control, good neighbors and respectful of other nations’ sovereignty, and progress in compatibility with NATO forces.¹⁸ Each of these criteria fit into NATO’s larger goal of spreading democracy and stability. Current NATO members have to determine if a potential member nation can uphold the foundation principles and overall strengthen the alliance. If they cannot or pose a threat, then they are not admitted. It is interesting to note proposed updates to the criteria which include evaluating a potential member nation’s treatment of minority groups, established democratic political systems, commitment to peaceful resolution, and a willingness to directly contribute militarily to NATO.¹⁹ The formal process for admission into NATO takes place over seven steps. The first step is the start of the conversation. This initial conversation is broken into two parts: a) the prerequisite and b) the contribution. Part A of this conversation goes over a potential member’s willingness to join NATO and goes over the prerequisites or requirements that are expected in order to adequately fulfill NATO’s goals.²⁰ Part B ensures that the nation will be able to meet the contributions and obligations that come along with membership i.e., troops and a portion of the budget. These conversations end in either how to move forward in submitting a letter of intent, which is step two, or a plan for how to improve weak areas. If a nation is ready to move forward, they send NATO a letter of intent and include timetables for how and when they will carry out the necessary reforms in their country.²¹ When this is received, NATO prepares to alter the Washington Treaty by ally ratification to include new member nations. Each member nation has their own internal processes for ratification but once that is completed, it is left to the potential member nation to ratify.²² When the instruments of accession are left with the United States Department of State, the membership becomes official. While Bosnia has expressed interest in joining NATO, there is need for more

¹⁷ NATO, “Enlargement and Article 10,” NATO, accessed December 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm.

¹⁸ NATO.

¹⁹ NATO.

²⁰ NATO.

²¹ NATO.

²² NATO.

improvement before membership can be considered. Bosnia has not officially entered any of the steps listed above but remains a partner through the MAP.

Expansion of NATO into the Balkans

The expansion or enlargement of NATO is not to threaten any one nation but, to continue to foster partnership and security across Europe. NATO is specifically interested in seeing “a Europe whole and free, united in peace, democracy and common values” in the aftermath of the Cold War.²³ NATO really exists to act as stability in a region of the world that is incredibly diverse in religion, ethnicity, and ideology. This vision requires member nations that can support NATO’s mission by being a peaceful presence and promoting democratic values. The alliance has expanded from twelve members in its 1949 founding to thirty-one members today.²⁴ These member nations come from every area of Europe and include nations that were formerly controlled by Soviet Russia and Yugoslavia. During the Cold War, three rounds of expansion occurred in order to gain strategic advantage by admitting Greece and Turkey, West Germany, and Spain as members. Post-Cold War, six more rounds of expansion occurred bringing in East Germany, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Finland.²⁵ With the Warsaw Pact, that dissolved the USSR, and fall of the Berlin Wall, there was a new commitment to peace that was evident in Europe.

The Western Balkans, which is mostly former Yugoslavia, has been seen as an area worthy of NATO expansion. In 2008, the Bucharest Summit addressed the idea of expanding into the Western Balkans and invited Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro to “start intensified dialogues” with NATO in hopes of bringing them into membership in the future.²⁶ Since then, Montenegro has become a member of NATO in 2017. Montenegro followed similar steps that Bosnia is currently taking like being a part of the MAP. Due to the unique challenges in a multi-ethnic government that Bosnia is experiencing, they have been slower in instituting effective change. The rotating presidency leaves less time for policy reform by the ethnicity in power. Additionally, the Serb state, Republika Srpska has threatened succession from the nation on several occasions and in 2021, the Bosnian Serb President Dodik announced the withdraw of Republika Srpska troops from Bosnia’s military, judicial body, and tax administration which further raised fears over a succession crisis.²⁷ A succession of a portion of Bosnia would not contribute to peace and stability in the Balkan region.

Analysis of Bosnia to NATO Criteria for Membership

Nations that are admitted to NATO have a set of criteria as a sort of prerequisite to determine their ability to effectively contribute to the organization and mission. Bosnia has several areas specifically in their economic, defense, and social policy that need improvement before they can move forward in the membership process. Bosnia is transitioning to a free-

²³ NATO.

²⁴ NATO.

²⁵ NATO.

²⁶ NATO.

²⁷ “Bosnia-Herzegovina Country Profile.”

market economy but is still in the early stages. The country is struggling with its own internal market, especially between states, but has been making improvements on its competitive nature globally.²⁸ The political nature and system of the presidency has made it difficult to pass economic reform policy because of the frequent change in leadership. The internal market should be a focus point for Bosnia as they pursue membership in NATO because it will help to create more stability. The unemployment rates are also high in Bosnia currently. That is another issue that will need to be addressed. One improvement that has already been made is a shift to focusing more of services that can add value like IT, trading, and tourism.²⁹ These services provided by Bosnia can boost the economy and the platform for Bosnia to interact with the world. These prevalent industries also open doors for more collaboration, and growth, for Bosnia with other NATO partner nations. The free market economy, particularly internally, will have to improve in order for Bosnia to be a member of NATO.

In terms of social or domestic policy, Bosnia made little to no improvement in its competitiveness and inclusive growth.³⁰ Two specific examples of this can be seen in education and technological advancement. The 2023 Report noted that the overall quality of education in Bosnia is lacking. Furthermore, they have not been staying up to date in terms of technological advancements. This implies that their slow transitions to more digitized methods have had an impact of their ability to compete with the rest of the world.

Bosnia is also receiving criticism by the Human Rights Watch for its various human rights issues. Domestic violence, especially against women, is one of Bosnia's most pressing human rights violations.³¹ This can be partially blamed on the incohesiveness of the Bosnian government and their inability to function together. Religious and ethnic tensions still have a foothold in Bosnia. While the hate crimes do not happen on such a large scale, like the Bosnian Civil War, they still happen throughout the country and need to be addressed. The COVID-19 pandemic also took a toll on Bosnia in "increased poverty and food deprivation and worsened social and economic inequalities."³² Bosnia must address and ensure fair treatment of various minorities, ethnicities, and religions. The Bible speaks to the importance of addressing human rights issues in Proverbs 31:8-9 saying, "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves... speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." It is important that government defends the rights of those who cannot defend themselves. While those in leadership in Bosnia may not know Christ, there is still a level of basic human morality and dignity that is relevant in defending the those who have been broken by the system that was supposed to protect them. The history of ethnic tension and violence in Bosnia's past and current human rights concerns may be barriers to NATO membership for Bosnia.

In terms of defense policy and reform, Bosnia has established plans for reform with NATO in order to work towards membership. The Defense Capacity Building Package, as

²⁸ "Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed December 6, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5613.

²⁹ "Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina."

³⁰ "Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina."

³¹ Human Rights Watch, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Events of 2022," in *World Report 2023*, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

³² Human Rights Watch.

mentioned above, is the most recent showcase of cooperation between Bosnia and NATO and we have yet to see all the reform that can come from that plan. However, a few notable changes had come to Bosnia's government and military structure because of previous cooperation with NATO. The military reform that took place in 2003 and 2004 was ultimately successful because it focused on the authority of the President as the Commander-in-Chief over the armed forces and establishing state-level governments that supported that as well.³³ Bosnia currently needs more investment into the artillery, infrastructure, and training that is required of the modern armed forces. While they have a solid land force, there should be investment into other areas of the military and consideration for how Bosnia will be able to militarily supply for NATO.

Opposition to Bosnian Membership in NATO

While the goal of NATO is to create peace throughout Europe, one nation, Russia, finds ways to directly oppose the advancement of NATO. In the past, Russia has been responsible for failed coups in Montenegro and North Macedonia before they were granted membership in NATO.³⁴ This is direct violations of a nation's sovereignty. Russia was not always opposed to NATO like we see today. When NATO was first started, Russia was open to being a member in order to become tied closer to the United States. When they were rejected, Russian aggression in Europe increased and they claimed that "Washington took advantage of Russia's temporary weakness."³⁵ If Bosnia were to get membership in NATO, Russia made threats against the organization and claimed that nuclear weapons would be pointing at Moscow from Sarajevo.³⁶ Russia sees NATO as out to get them or coming after the destruction of Russia but that is a baseless claim. The intent was never to separate Russia from Eastern Europe but rather to operate a peaceful forum for engagement with Russia.³⁷ Instead, Russian xenophobia and nationalism got in the way of seeing a peaceful solution. Serbia is seen as a proxy state of Russia which only further complicates the situation. A bordering nation being so closely tied with an adversary does pose a threat to Bosnia. NATO must determine at what lengths they are willing to protect partner nations. A further concern would be weighing the risk of greater European security vs. NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conclusion

The research presented in this paper evaluates the relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in order to determine where Bosnia falls on the pathway to NATO membership. This paper examines the background, steps to membership, expansion of NATO, opposition to membership, and presents an analysis of

³³ Miscellaneous, "Defence White Paper of Bosnia and Herzegovina," June 2005, <http://www.mod.gov.ba/files/file/dokumenti/defense/engwhitebook.pdf>.

³⁴ "Kosovo, Bosnia Call for NATO Membership as War Rages in Ukraine | NATO News | Al Jazeera."

³⁵ Sergey Radchenko, "'Nothing but Humiliation for Russia': Moscow and NATO's Eastern Enlargement, 1993-1995," n.d.

³⁶ Zoran Radosavljevic, "Russian Envoy Makes Veiled Threats If Bosnia Joins NATO," www.euractiv.com, February 8, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/russian-envoy-makes-veiled-threats-if-bosnia-joins-nato/>.

³⁷ Radchenko, "'Nothing but Humiliation for Russia': Moscow and NATO's Eastern Enlargement, 1993-1995."

Bosnia's prospects towards NATO membership. In looking at the current situation, Bosnia has many improvements to make in social, economic, and defense policy before they will be considered for NATO membership.

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