

NATO:

Bosnia and Herzegovina's Best Friend and Worst Enemy

A NATO:

Bosznia-Hercegovina legjobb barátja és legnagyobb ellensége

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Abstract: This policy brief analyses Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) tortured politics of potential NATO membership. The topic has divided the country politically for most of its lifetime and continues to divide the public largely along ethnic lines. In December 2019, amid much domestic political confusion and acrimony, BiH submitted its first Annual National Program (ANP) to NATO, potentially a major step towards a closer relationship with the alliance. This brief outlines a number of political perspectives on the BiH–NATO relationship and examines the history of the country's slow approach towards the alliance. It then discusses the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces and the defence budget compared with NATO guidelines, such as the targets set in the 2014 Wales Declaration, showing that BiH is far from the standards a membership will require. It concludes that although steps are being taken towards a closer relationship with NATO, the direction of travel is far from assured, and it will continue to be vulnerable to the country's turbulent politics.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, NATO, Internal Division Defence Spending, Armed Forces

Összefoglaló: Az elemzés Bosznia-Hercegovinának a potenciális NATO-tagsággal kapcsolatos, ellentmondásokkal terhelt politikáját tekinti át. A téma az ország fennállása óta az etnikai vonalak mentén osztja meg a közvéleményt. Bosznia-Hercegovina 2019 decemberében, belpolitikai zavarok közepette nyújtotta be első ízben az éves nemzeti programját a NATO-nak, ami jelentős lépés lehet a szorosabb együttműködés felé. Az elemzés ismerteti Bosznia-Hercegovina és a NATO kapcsolatának politikai perspektíváit, bemutatja az országnak a szövetség felé történő lassú közeledésének a történetét és a fegyveres erői helyzetét, valamint azt, hogy milyen a védelmi költségvetése a NATO iránymutatásaihoz – például a 2014. évi walesi nyilatkozatban kitűzött célokhoz – képest. Ez utóbbiból kiderül, hogy Bosznia-Hercegovina még messze van a tagság eléréséhez szükséges kritériumoktól. Az elemzés következtetése, hogy bár az ország valóban tesz lépéseket a szorosabb NATO-kapcsolatokért, de azok még korántsem egyértelműek, és az ország viharos politikája továbbra is jelentős mértékben befolyásolja őket.

Kulcsszavak: Bosznia-Hercegovina, NATO, a védelmi költségvetés belső felosztása, fegyveres erők

INTRODUCTION

One of the many thorny issues for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) since the end of the war in 1995 has been the country's relationship with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Indeed, the final issue standing in the way of forming a government after the October 2018 election, and one of the main reasons the talks of forming a government dragged on for more than a year, was whether



BiH should submit its Annual National Plan (ANP) to NATO. While the leading Bosniak and Croat parties all favoured moving forward towards membership, the leading Serb parties were adamantly opposed. Only on 5 December 2019, fourteen months after the election, was an agreement reached on appointing Zoran Tegeltija of the Serb-dominated Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata*, SNSD) as Chairman of the Council of Ministers (i.e. Prime Minister). Within an hour of the new Council of Ministers formally taking office on 23 December 2019, a paper was submitted to NATO, which, while not bearing the formal title of ANP, was nonetheless accepted in NATO headquarters, thus paving the way for BiH to move forward with its Membership Action Plan (MAP).

For political observers, this was yet another case of BiH politicians' highly developed ability to subordinate principle to the pursuit of high office. Clearly, Milorad Dodik's SNSD had given way on the NATO question in exchange for the prime minister's position, something which the leading Bosniak and Croat parties had resisted until then. [Dodik would in turn face accusations in Republika Srpska \(RS\) for selling out](#), probably leading him to provoke yet another of BiH's periodic constitutional crises in February 2020.

Why these theatrics? Considering the historical instability in the Western Balkans, where neighbouring countries are seemingly at war with one another at least once in a hundred years, and the threat of further instability is never far away, NATO membership would seem an obvious solution that could bring peace and stability. Moreover, the countries in the region that have joined NATO have experienced increased foreign direct investment (FDI), suggesting an indirect economic gain from the security and stability NATO brings. For instance, [Montenegro has received EUR 1.3 billion of FDI since it became a member in 2017, with investments from Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey alone having increased by some 50%](#). By contrast, [in 2018 FDI accounted for only 2.4% of BiH's GDP](#), the lowest among the Western Balkan countries.

Considering that [a 2018 opinion poll put](#) support for NATO membership at 56%, it can seem surprising that this is even a live political issue. After all, BiH cannot be a Switzerland of the Western Balkans in an economic sense, nor can it isolate itself in security terms. So what is the problem?

Simply put, the issue is incredibly divisive. Although a clear majority in a [2018 survey](#) expressed support for membership (56% vs. 38% of the total number of respondents), this breaks down along ethnic lines, pitting the majority of Bosniaks (50.1%) and Croats (14.6%) against the Serb minority (30.8%). Thus, while 84% of Bosniaks and 75% of Croats support eventual membership, only 10% of Serbs do. Given BiH's byzantine political structure and myriad veto players, meaningful progress towards NATO membership has been frustratingly elusive.

This policy brief seeks to explain the troubled history of BiH's integration with NATO, the current situation in terms of BiH's ability to move forward towards membership, the preparedness of the Armed Forces for membership, and where the politics of membership stand today.

WHY SO CONTROVERSIAL?

As with so much in BiH, one needs to go back to the war of 1992–1995 in order to understand why the issue of NATO membership is so controversial, quite unlike the situation in most other Central and Eastern European countries, where membership was popular with the people and enjoyed cross-party political support.

For Serbs generally, NATO became an enemy during the war years. It was NATO forces, led by the United States of America, that conducted the bombing campaign against Bosnian Serbs, which brought them to heel during August and September 1995 (Operation Deliberate Forces), presaging the Dayton Peace Agreement of November the same year. In the following years, NATO formed the backbone of both the Implementation Force (IFOR), 1995–1996, and Stabilisation Force (SFOR), 1996–2004. In 1999, NATO once more intervened against Serb interests, when Operation Allied Force was undertaken to drive Serbian forces from Kosovo, a then-Serbian province widely considered the birthplace of the Serb nation. The fact that most NATO members subsequently recognised Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 has furthermore meant that Serbs mostly hold a negative opinion of the Alliance. In the aforementioned 2018 survey, 60% of those opposing NATO membership cited the NATO interventions of the 1990s as the reason for their opposition. As Serbs, both in BiH and in Serbia itself, have largely felt politically isolated in the West, they have instead leaned heavily in the direction of Russia, which has long been an impeccable foe of NATO and its role in the European security order. Moreover, many leading Bosnian Serb politicians continue promoting separatist ideas, whether to become part of Serbia or to become an independent state, neither of which NATO would tolerate.

For Bosnian Croats on the other hand, NATO membership is a welcome option, considering that their political elite are mostly oriented towards their neighbouring nation state, Croatia, which joined the Alliance in 2009. The ambition of BiH also joining is rather unproblematic from their perspective, and it tallies with the way NATO membership has traditionally been viewed in Central and Eastern European accession states, as a security guarantor. While many Bosnian Croats identify more with Croatia than with Bosnia and Herzegovina, this mostly takes the form of wanting an entity, like the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine*, FBiH) and RS, based on their ethnicity, rather than actual separatism. There is therefore less of a direct conflict between their aims.

The Bosniak group also sees NATO membership in relatively traditional terms, but perhaps with added intensity compared to most. Bosniaks, having been victims of most of the crimes and atrocities committed during the War, largely view NATO as an organisation that finally took responsibility for ending the fighting, in stark contrast to the ill-starred UN peacekeeping missions. Entering NATO would therefore provide



the widest range of security guarantees of all, a promise that something like what happened in the 1990s could not happen again. Furthermore, as Bosniaks are the group most committed to maintaining BiH as a state, they view NATO membership as the ultimate guarantee of BiH's international borders. Membership would, in this view, once and for all put an end to Serb dreams of splitting off from the country, whether for independence or to join with the neighbouring nation state.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA'S HISTORY WITH NATO

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) [was founded in 1949](#) on the principle of collective defence. Right from the start, Art. 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty has been the basis for [the Open Door Policy](#). This states that any country in the Euro-Atlantic area is eligible to join NATO, on the condition that it is prepared to meet the standards and obligations of membership, to contribute to the security of the Alliance, and share NATO's values of democracy, reform and the rule of law. In 2017, Montenegro joined the Alliance as the twenty-ninth member, followed by North Macedonia as the 30th in March 2020, leaving only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo on the outside.

[The BiH Presidency expressed the desire to join NATO in June 2001](#). First, several structural changes had to be undertaken. For the first decade after the war, BiH had two armies completely separated from each other, with relatively little interaction. Only in March 2004 was a [national ministry of defence](#) founded, and in May 2004, the first-ever joint collective exercise was conducted between the Army of the FBiH and Army of RS, with an integrated explosives disposal unit deployed to Iraq in 2005. The [Joint Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) were established on 1 January 2006. The Entity Ministries of Defence and Army disbanded, employees from the Ministries of Defence of FBiH and RS transferred to the new Ministry of Defence of BiH, and a new single defence budget came into force.

The country received the invitation to join [the Partnership for Peace \(PfP\)](#) at the Riga Summit in July 2006, which BiH did on 14 December 2006. In September 2008, Bosnia and Herzegovina agreed [an Individual Partnership Action Plan \(IPAP\)](#), with the aim of further developing the country's relationship with NATO. [In 2009, then-Chairman of the BiH Presidency, Nebojša Radmanović](#), sent a formal letter to NATO in which he unambiguously confirmed the country's commitment to NATO membership, calling it of crucial importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on this, [NATO agreed, at a summit in Tallinn, Estonia, in 2010, to launch the Membership Action Plan \(MAP\)](#) for Bosnia and Herzegovina, while specifying certain conditions that would have to be met. However, the issue of MAP provides an illustration of just how much Bosnian politics makes for malleable principles. The same Nebojša Radmanović, who as a member of Milorad Dodik's SNSD served in the presidency in 2009, would nine years later turn 180 degrees, now criticising NATO's mistake in green lighting BiH's MAP. Radmanović now argued that NATO should have known the

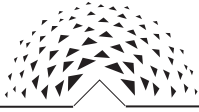
political conditions and relations in the country, especially that one entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, his own Republika Srpska, does not support NATO membership.

One of the main conditions NATO set in 2010 was for the proper registration of immovable defence property (barracks, bases, training facilities, other land etc.) under the state. To this end, [the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) defined sixty-three facilities of military purpose; forty-one situated in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and twenty-two situated in Republika Srpska. Yet so far, only thirty-three out of sixty-three facilities are properly registered, all of them located in the Federation of BiH, while Republika Srpska has refused to transfer any of its military property. This does not mean that the Army is not in day-to-day possession of the facilities, the issue is one of legal ownership. The issue of who owns and registers land in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the entities or the state – has long been controversial in other contexts, too. A Constitutional Court ruling on ownership of vacant agricultural land was what provided the spark for the February 2020 constitutional crisis.

Despite all the 2010 conditions not being properly addressed, [NATO foreign ministers nonetheless decided](#) in December 2018 that the Alliance would accept the BiH's first Annual National Program (ANP). [The ANP](#) focuses on political, economic, defence, resource, security and legal reforms and it serves as the basis for practical cooperation and political dialogue between NATO and Bosnia and Herzegovina. [The submission](#) would mean the activation of MAP, and – even if MAP in itself does not prejudge any final decision on membership – another major step forward in Bosnia and Herzegovina's relations with the North Atlantic Alliance.

Finally, and after much delay and political brinkmanship, on 23 December 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina's tripartite Presidency sent a "Reform Programme" to NATO. Probably deliberately, it was left ambiguous what exactly BiH had sent: an ANP or not? The document bore the wrong title, and was cleansed of NATO jargon, yet it covered the points normally expected for an ANP. [Milorad Dodik, for his part, stated](#) that the document was not an ANP, and that the country will never become a NATO member as long as he is in the Presidency. His colleagues in the Presidency, however, [Željko Komšić](#) (Croat) and [Šefik Džaferović](#) (Bosniak) both stated that the country is now on its way towards NATO membership. So, in fact, did Mirko [Šarović](#), whose Serb Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka*, SDS) is the main opposition to Dodik's SNSD. But while Komšić and Džaferović saw potential membership as a good thing, Šarović viewed it as a betrayal. NATO, for its part, just quietly changed their website on 31 January 2020, to now state that Bosnia and Herzegovina was "participating" in MAP.

Leaving the internal political squabbles aside, on a more practical level, BiH and NATO have been partners for a long time. NATO has a military headquarters in Sarajevo; half of it is in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the other half is in Republika Srpska. [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) has declared a number of forces and assets as potentially available for PfP activities, including engineering (explosive ordnance disposal) capabilities and related equipment. The country has participated in the Interoperability Platform, which brings Allies together with 24 selected partners



that are active contributors to NATO's operations since 2014, and it is an active participant in the tailored Building Integrity (BI) programme, which focuses on good governance and transparent and effective use of defence resources. Since 2009, Bosnia and Herzegovina has contributed officers to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan as part of the Danish and German contingents, and now it contributes to NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan. This history led NATO Secretary General [Jens Stoltenberg](#) to state in 2017, "Bosnia and Herzegovina is a highly valued partner for NATO". In March 2019, BiH signed an agreement with NATO on securing sensitive information, and in December 2019, fifty-three members of the Armed Forces of BiH deployed to support NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

Picture 1

"No to NATO"

Billboard in Republika Srpska, Tying the Organisation to the Corona Crisis

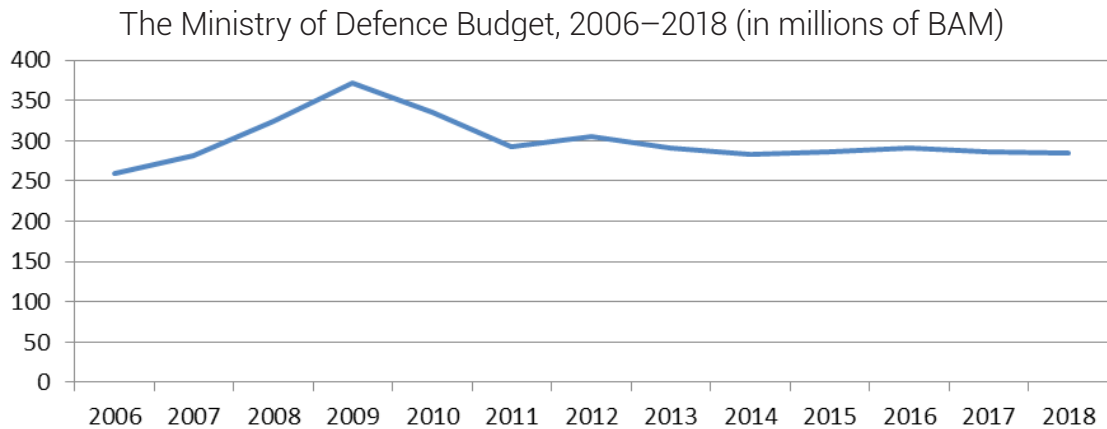


HOW PREPARED IS BIH FOR MEMBERSHIP?

But how prepared is Bosnia and Herzegovina for NATO membership, and how well do its military forces square up? At the outset of the unified military forces, [the Presidency of BiH decided](#) that the Armed Forces should have 10,000 professional military personnel, 1,000 civilian personnel serving the Armed Forces and 5,000 members in the reserves. But while the overall size is small, a much bigger problem is the very limited budget and the quality of the armed forces' equipment.

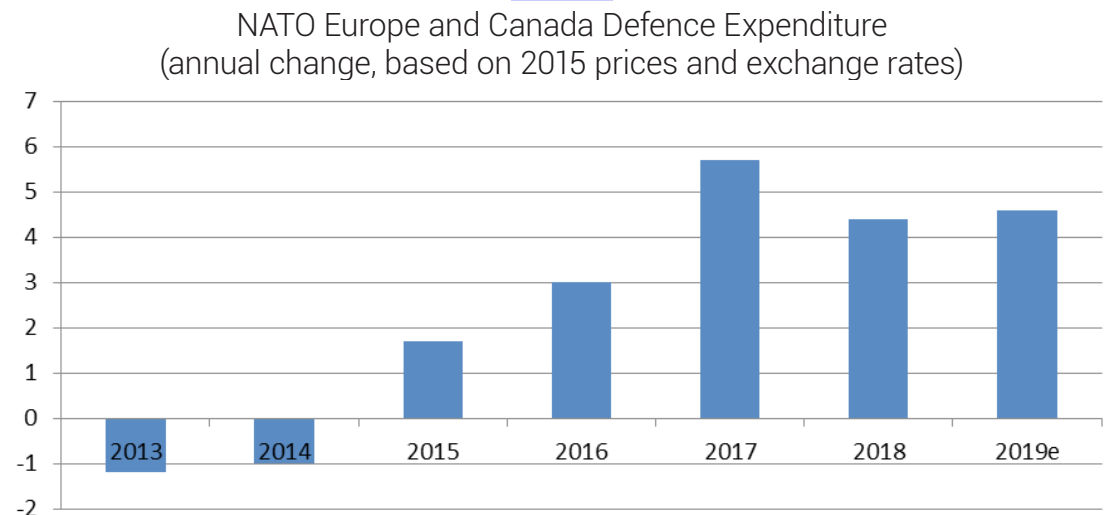
In stark contrast to targets set out in the 2014 Wales Summit declaration, the budget for the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina has stagnated in absolute terms for the past decade (Chart 1), meaning a significant hollowing out of the purchasing power due to inflation.

[Chart 1](#)



This standstill in expenditure is in clear contrast to the general development among the NATO members, where expenditures have gradually been rising since 2014.

[Chart 2](#)



While NATO recommends members spending 2% of the GDP on their militaries, BIH has not spent anywhere near that much since the early 2000s. In 2019, the country spent only 0.6% of its GDP on the military (Chart 3), a reflection of economic growth and the static spending in absolute terms. This level of spending would place Bosnia and Herzegovina second last in the NATO rankings, ahead only of Luxembourg (see Chart 4).



Chart 3

Military Spending in Bosnia and Herzegovina (% of GDP)

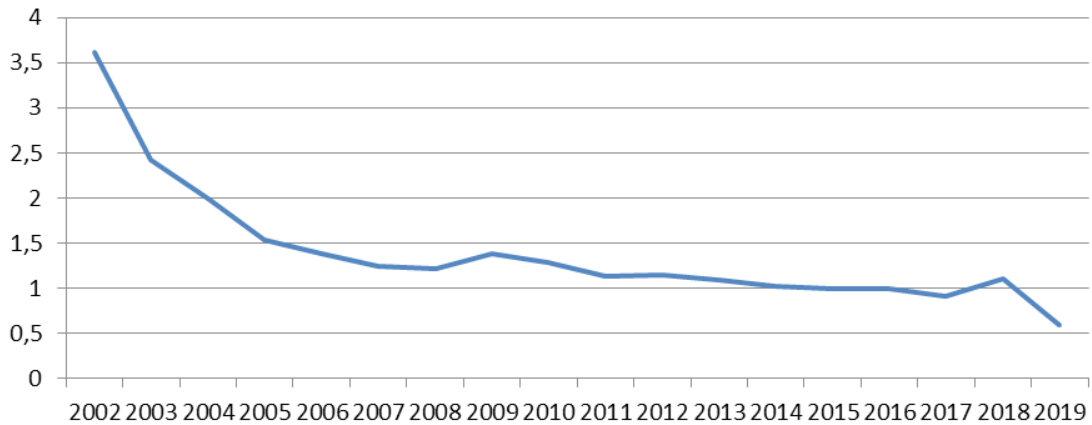
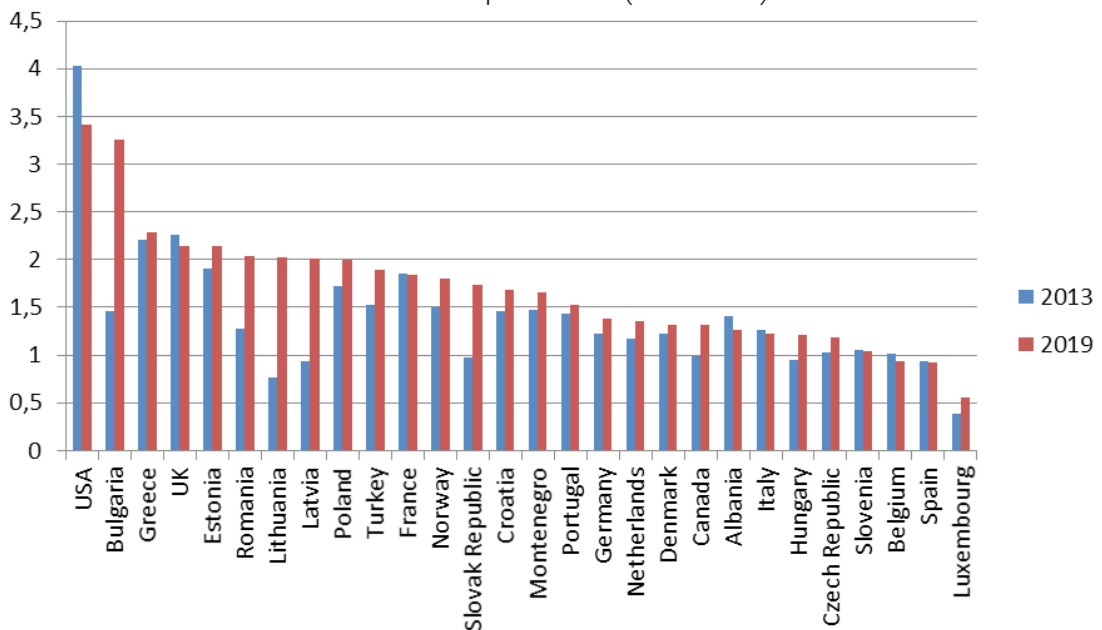


Chart 4

Defence Expenditure (% of GDP)



While membership itself is something that elicits strong feelings, there is notably less discussion of the size of the defence budget. However, even on this point one finds the ethnic angle. Thus, on the one hand, [Bakir Izetbegović](#), former two-term member of the Presidency and leader of the Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka Demokratske Akcije*, SDA), the largest Bosniak party, has recently argued for investing more in the Armed Forces, and by extension the powers of the state. In contrast, the President of Republika Srpska, [Željka Cvijanović](#), has responded that the money is better invested in the health care system and infrastructure. In her view, the Armed Forces' fighting capability was already so low, that further expenditure

was meaningless. RS has instead preferred strengthening the entity-controlled police force, [beefing up its paramilitary side](#), acquiring more heavy equipment, and considering creating additional “auxiliary police corps”.

Evaluating countries based on their current military forces and ability to generate it, the [Global Fire Power](#) (GFP) index places Bosnia and Herzegovina in 135th place out of 138 countries surveyed. One reason for this is that BiH does not have a real air force, no fighter aircraft and no proper air defences. While the army does possess a significant number of main battle tanks (320), armoured personnel carriers (332), heavy, light and self-propelled artillery (861 in total), and rocket projectors (143), much of this equipment is of Yugoslavian or Soviet origin, and even much of the Western-origin equipment is old, much dating to the 1950s and 1960s and was acquired second hand.

The BiH Armed Forces have largely relied on foreign donations. [The country received a donation in armament and military equipment of \\$250 million in 1997. More recently, in 2019, the United States approved \\$30.7 million for BiH to modernise its helicopters.](#) In 2020, the Government of the Republic of Turkey announced that it would donate [200 million Turkish liras](#) (approximately \$29,500,000) for the procurement of military equipment. One of the main preconditions, though, was that the equipment be ordered from Turkish companies.

Another major point where Bosnia and Herzegovina falls short is on the NATO guideline that 20% of military spending be allocated to equipment. In fact, in 2018, a full 67.2% of the Ministry of Defence budget was spent on salaries and 19.4% on compensations for employees, while only 3.3% was spent on the equipment (procurement, short-term maintenance, asset procurement, and reconstruction and investment). There was no procurement of aircraft, contemporary artillery or tanks (see Chart 5). This level of equipment expenditure places BiH at a lower level than any NATO member. Considering the stagnant budget and the old legacy equipment, and the “techflation” phenomenon that all militaries face, this does not bode well for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s ability to field modern, well-equipped armed forces.

Even with comparable countries, the BiH figures do not look good. Central and Eastern European (CEE) NATO countries spent between 34.21% (Latvia) and 76.96% (Croatia) of their budgets on personnel and between 3.37% (Croatia) and 36.98% (Lithuania) of equipment (percentage of total defence expenditure). Albania and Montenegro spent 9.42% and 11.05% of total defence expenditure on equipment, respectively, and 70.7% and 72.87% on personnel. Chart 6 shows just how much work BiH needs to do to make progress on this score.



Chart 5

The Ministry of Defence Budget, 2018

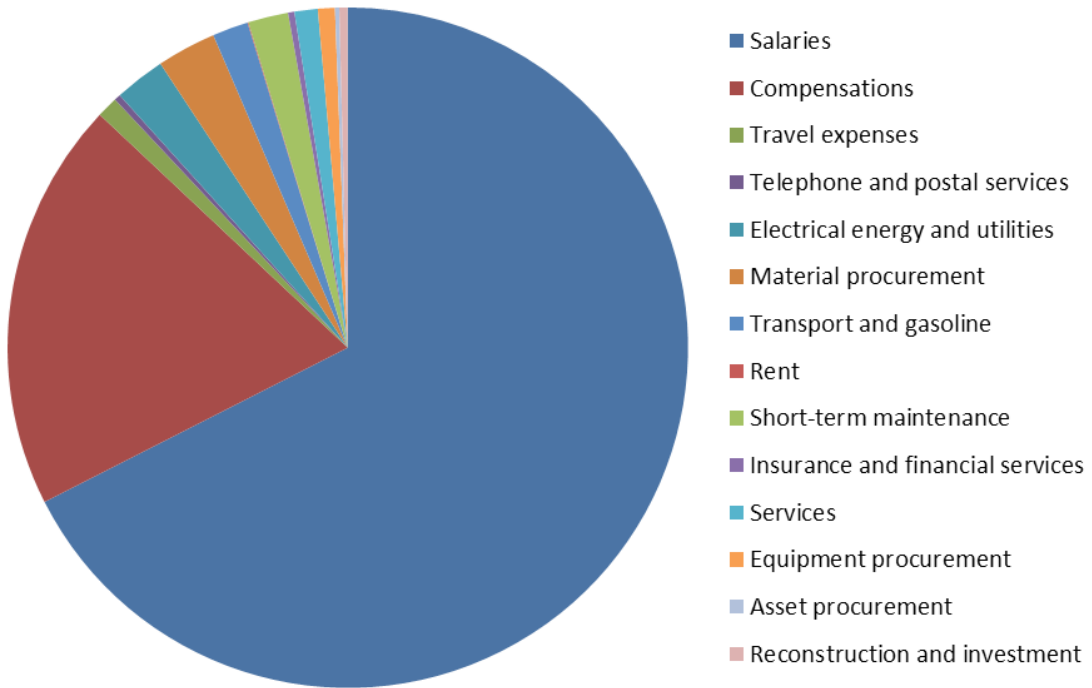
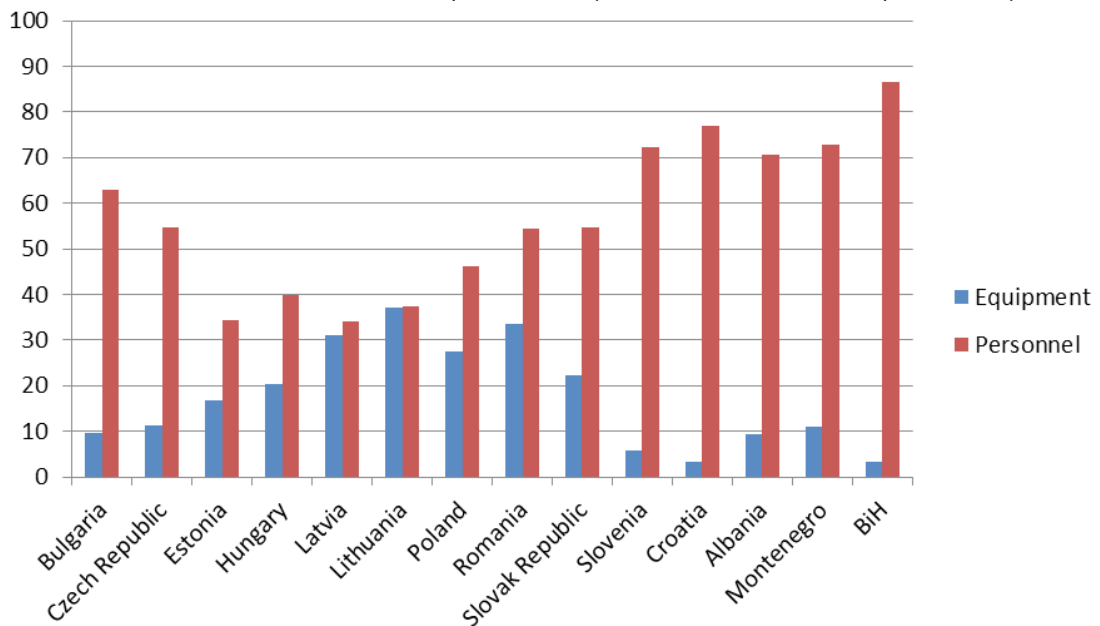


Chart 6

Distribution of Defence Expenditure (% of total defence expenditure)



CONCLUSION

When the Corona crisis hit Europe in March 2020, it also moved NATO membership of the political agenda in BiH, which, in the twisted political life of the country, probably suited all participants well enough. Now there were other things to be concerned with, and all could quietly back down from their confrontational stances. However, the underlying political problems remain unresolved, and the issues continue to divide the fragile polity.

NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina is and will ultimately remain a political question, both for the country itself and for the alliance. An eventual invitation to join NATO will not be due to BiH's ability to provide security or contribute significantly to Europe's collective security, but rather as a way for the alliance to stabilise a historically volatile region.

BiH has neglected its armed forces for years; it needs to drastically increase spending in order to meet NATO guidelines, and to spend the money better in order to modernise the forces. This will be a long-term process, but at least MAP is now providing a framework for it, which BiH has now, however fitfully, embraced. But long, hard slogs has never been the strongest suit of the BiH political elite, and the possibility that NATO membership will fall prey to political machinations of one side or another, or be sacrificed for the narrow political self-interest of some faction or other, remains worryingly strong.