

BalkanInsight

US Senate to Vote on Montenegro's NATO Bid

Montenegro's NATO accession is going to ratification in the US Senate, although some Americans claim that accepting the tiny Balkan country will make no difference to the military alliance and could further damage ties to Russia.

Dusica Tomovic

December 6, 2016

The US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday is expected to back a resolution that gives consent to ratification of the Protocol on the accession of Montenegro into NATO, which would then be forwarded to the Senate for a vote.

However, some claim the Committee chair, Republican Senator Bob Corker - who is said to be under consideration for the post of Secretary of State in the new US administration - previously delayed a vote on Montenegro's membership against the wishes of President Barack Obama.

The White House initiated the ratification process of Montenegro's Accession Protocol to NATO on June 28, sending an initiative to the Senate for ratification.

"Montenegro's accession to NATO will demonstrate to other countries in the Balkans and beyond that NATO's door remains open to nations that undertake the reforms necessary to meet NATO's requirements and contribute to the security of the Alliance, and is yet another milestone in advancing the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkans," President Obama's initiative read.

Some media in Washington, however, say Montenegro's membership would be more trouble than it is worth.

In a comment published by the Forbes magazine on Monday, Doug Bandow dismissed tiny Montenegro as the "military midget", and said the Senate should not ratify Montenegro's membership of NATO.

"The Balkans obviously is of more interest to Russia and Europe than to America. Adding Podgorica to NATO would make the world more dangerous for the US in order to take a symbolic slap at Moscow," Bandow wrote, referencing Montenegro's increasingly strained ties to its old mentor, Russia.

Ahead of the vote before the Foreign Relation Committee, several other influential US magazines and analysts also raised doubts about Montenegro's NATO membership, saying it could cause additional problems in Washington-Moscow relations - which Trump has said he wishes to improve.

In the article titled "Does NATO Need Montenegro?," the magazine the *National Interest* said Montenegro would contribute little to the alliance.

From a US perspective, adding a country like Montenegro to NATO is a negative prospect, the paper maintained.

It said Montenegro adds no real assets – economic or military – to the alliance. Secondly, it noted, under Article 5 of the NATO charter, the United States would become obliged to defend a country that is irrelevant to US national security.

"Not that anyone is threatening Montenegro, but if the country were invaded by a foreign power – even Russia – it wouldn't make the US any less secure. So why should the United States risk war with a foreign power – including Russia – over a country that doesn't matter to US security?" the paper asked.

The daily *Roll Call*, which is considered close to the Republican majority on Capitol Hill, in its analysis published last week, said Trump's election in November might put the Balkan state's admission to NATO on ice.

However, a Foreign Relations Committee Democrat, Benjamin Cardin, said he was "eager to see the Senate take up the measure [on Montenegro] before it adjourns next month.

"If we don't, we play right into [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's hands," Cardin said. "Putin did everything he could to disrupt the Montenegro Parliamentary elections in an effort to stop the expansion of NATO," he added, referring to the October general elections in which the authorities claimed they narrowly prevented a coup being launched by Russian and Serb interests.

Montenegro signed the accession protocol with NATO on May 19, marking the final stage of the country's path to full membership of the alliance. The process is expected to take about a year-and-a-half but will be complete only when US lawmakers have ratified the protocol.

Montenegrins remain sharply divided about joining NATO and a recent poll suggested only about 45 per cent of the population support membership.

NATO remains especially controversial among members of Montenegro's large ethnic Serbian community because of the role it played in enabling neighbouring Kosovo to break away from Serbia.

Many Serbs also resent the way the country's pro-Western government has loosened ties with Montenegro's traditional ally, Russia.