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From Integration to Resilience: Rethinking Euro-Atlanticism in the Post-Ukraine European Order

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reshaped European strategy, throwing back into the limelight questions over the character of Euro-Atlantic integration. For smaller states in particular, the post-Ukraine environment shows not just possibilities but also limitations to being joined together in a fight against external aggressor. The article argues that Euro-Atlanticism is transforming from a model focused on integrated institutions to one that stresses resilience-the ability of states and alliances to absorb shocks; adapt to a hybrid kind of threat; remain cohesive amid geopolitical uncertainty. Focusing on NATO and EU post-2022 evolution, it examines the way small states, particularly in the Western Balkans, manoeuvre the new balance between dependence on security and strategic independence. The analysis argues that the sustainability of the Euro-Atlantic order is the function, not just of external deterrence, but of internal political integrity, institutional trust and societal capacity.

Keywords: Euro-Atlanticism, resilience, NATO, European Union, Western Balkans, Ukraine war

Introduction

The geopolitics of Europe has changed dramatically since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. What started as a regional war has become a key test of the Euro-Atlantic security order and of Europe's ability to serve as a unified strategic actor. The invasion revived

fundamental debates around deterrence, sovereignty, and alliance politics that had faded since the Cold War's conclusion. For many European countries, especially smaller and more fragile ones, the war was not only a battle over territory but a test of political identity and strategic outlook. The Euro-Atlantic project - based on NATO's collective defense and the European Union's political integration - has long pledged stability via shared commitments and interdependence. Yet the shocks of recent years have laid bare the vulnerability of these mechanisms. The COVID-19 pandemic, the resurgence of great-power competition, and the war in Ukraine have all exposed weaknesses in Europe's security, energy, and governance systems. As a result, Euro-Atlantic cooperation has begun to have its emphasis turn from integration, understood as institutional alignment, to resilience, conceived as the ability to withstand and recover from complex crises (Boin & Lodge, 2021; Hale et al., 2023).

This paper examines that paradigm shift. It contends that Euro-Atlanticism in the post-Ukraine order emerges from three interlinked processes: (1) consolidation of NATO as the central pillar of European security; (2) re-politicization of the European Union as a geopolitical actor; and (3) adaptation of small state actors who attempt to imbue membership or partnership with practical resilience. The Western Balkans, where North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro - while others remain outside - have joined NATO, provides a revealing regional lens.

The chapter unfolds in four parts. The first examines scholars' discussions of Euro-Atlanticism and resilience. The second is the study of how NATO and the EU have redefined their strategic goals since 2022. The third is attentive to small states' position in this transition, as they struggle to navigate their mutual dependency and agency. The last section considers its broader significance for the Western Balkans and collective defense and solidarity to come in Europe.

Literature Review

The Euro-Atlanticism derived from the post-World War II era, which is the ideological and institutional underpinning for cooperation of North America and Western Europe (Deutsch et al., 1957; Sloan, 2016). It was based on a common commitment to the principles of liberal democracy, collective defense and economic interdependence. Within this context, NATO and the EU formed mutually supportive institutions: the former providing military security and the latter promoting political and economic cohesion. As Wallace (2005) and even Howorth (2014) have argued, Euro-Atlanticism is both a security community and a normative order-a network of states united by both strategic interests, but sharing internal values of governance and human rights. In the post-Cold War times the Euro-

Atlanticism literature developed in synchronization with both liberalization and expansion processes of NATO and EU. The early theorists Keohane (1984) and Moravcsik (1998) insisted that the stability of multilateral institutions lies in institutionalization of state interests in predictable norms and cooperative structures. Subsequent discussions, including Kupchan (2010) and Nye (2004) also examined how asymmetries of power and 'soft power' dynamics have an influence on the transatlantic partnership. This post-1990s literature focused on the transformative and exclusionary aspects of the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, which we have been discussing-in particular through the process of democratization among candidate states while, at the same time, being exclusionary in drawing a (sometimes even hostile) line between the West and the post-Soviet sphere.

The 2014 outbreak of the Ukraine crisis and the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 led to new research into whether a single, integrated Euro-Atlantic order could possibly prevail, even under renewed confrontation with Russia (Charap & Colton, 2018; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Analysts like Mearsheimer (2014) and Walt (2018) cautioned that NATO's eastward expansion would lead to spirals of insecurity, whereas others (e.g., Applebaum, 2020; Freedman, 2022) argue it to be a moral and strategic imperative. In this discussion, we've seen an interest move to resilience - a term that combines military preparedness with societal endurance. In European security studies resilience has become more of a multidimensional construct encompassing institutional, economic and informational stability (Boin & Lodge, 2021; Leonard, 2023).

The 2022 Strategic Compass of the European Union explicitly identifies resilience as a foundational competency, as the capacity to anticipate, resist and recover from crises. Accordingly, NATO's Strategic Concept (2022) broadens the scope of its objectives to address hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and disinformation, challenges which, beyond conventional defense capabilities, force alliance cohesiveness. For small states, resilience is as old as civilization itself - survival tactics. Legacy literature from the likes of Vital (1971), Keohane (1969) and Thorhallsson (2012) posit that small powers make up for the lack of military strength by engaging in multilateral diplomacy and norm entrepreneurship. It has recently been reinforced in the literature by associating small-state security with membership in collective defense arrangements such as NATO and the EU (Ingebritsen, 2006; Bailes et al., 2016). These states depend on, though not the only, foreign guarantees and the quality of domestic governance and social cohesion to strengthen strategic credibility.

In the Western Balkans, academics such as Bieber (2018), Vangeli (2020), and Maksuti (2022) have explored the nexus of Euro-Atlantic integration and state resilience. Their analyses indicate that though NATO

and EU membership enhance institutional legitimacy, systemic governance flaws and political divisions persist in a long-term equilibrium. As Maksuti (2021) observes in The Difficult Passage, post-accession adaptation is often similar to pre-accession reform, particularly for states with weak institutions and competing regional influences. This body of scholarship emphasizes resilience not as a defensive but rather a transformative condition. It needs to transform formal alignment into functional capacity; Euro-Atlantic values should be more than something agreed upon or assumed; rather, they must be internalized. Here we see this literature coalescing around a crucial and illuminating point: the survival of the Euro-Atlantic order is less an expansion, and more a deepening of the democratic and institutional integration of its participants and partners.

Euro-Atlanticism and the Post-Ukraine Security Order

The war in Ukraine has reframed and reset the European security architecture and the strategic role for both NATO and the European Union. What had often been characterized as institutional inertia or "crisis fatigue" in the 2010s was suddenly replaced by a major wave of coordination, deterrence, and defense investment not seen before. The Euro-Atlantic community, once riven by rival national imperatives, gained a newfound sense of collective urgency. But this reunified spirit had come with the realization that integration alone could no longer be the answer to stability-resilience could only emerge as a paradigm for change.

NATO's Strategic Concept (2022) represents a decisive transition away from post–Cold War optimism toward a realist assessment of systemic competition. It lists Russia as the most direct and formidable threat to Allied security, but also describes China as a systemic challenger. For the first time, hybrid threats, cyberattacks and disinformation are given equal weight under traditional security threats. This expansion of the security agenda is a sign of a conceptual shift: defense goes beyond defending borders, and now also encompasses defense of democratic institutions and cohesiveness. The creation of the Resilience Committee of NATO highlights that the integration of security is now no longer an issue of protection and "wicked", "invisible," or ad hoc nature, but a necessity that places readiness and resilience as core elements within the Alliance activities (NATO, 2022).

Running parallel to this, the European Union's Strategic Compass (2022) is the Union's most ambitious effort to describe its geopolitical role. It is an intention to progress from reacting to crisis to proactive strategic autonomy. The document emphasizes resilience, technological sovereignty and defense cooperation, issues long thought outside the European Union's sphere. As Howorth (2022) maintains, here the transition occurs to a more neutral role (i.e., one in a semipermeable sense) of the EU's Common

Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) within the Euro-Atlantic political context. Revival of transatlantic relations after 2022 is in striking contrast to the skepticism that was the hallmark of the Trump era. The Biden administration's firm commitment to NATO brought back confidence in collective defence, while Europe's novel sanctions against Russia showed political and normative unity. It is argued, nonetheless, that the relationship is asymmetric: the U.S. still has a decisive role in providing the majority of military capacities and intelligence infrastructure and the EU is in contributing the economic, diplomatic, and development tools (Simón, 2023). Such interdependence demonstrates that Euro-Atlanticism is still a division of labor between hard and soft power, not a combination of strategic authority.

Conversely, the Ukraine war laid bare the vulnerabilities of Europe's energy and defense dependencies. Germany's reversal of a policy of strategic restraint for decades under the Zeitenwende initiative represents a continental reconfiguration. By rearmament and diversification, the new policy towards decarbonization of energy power sources may redefine European geopolitics: both between NATO and the EU, but also between NATO and Europe by resurrecting debate on the limits of their autonomy. The transformations come with opportunities and risks for smaller states. From one perspective the increased significance of NATO helps strengthen their security guarantees; from another, the decision-making power of powerbrokers may cause significant minority groups to lose their voice.

The task for the Euro-Atlantic system is therefore no more one of deterrence than of inclusivity and unity among a diverse membership – and this will be the true test of its credibility in years to come. In this transition in security, Euro-Atlanticism is having what one might call a "resilience turn": moving from expansion to consolidation, integration to endurance. Such a turn acknowledges that ensuring democratic governance and societal stability is as important for deterrence as military capability.

For so, the resilience of the Euro-Atlantic community is less a question of its borders than its internal coherence - its ability to work collectively under challenge without splintering along national or institutional lines.

Small States and Strategic Resilience in the Western Balkans

Small states find themselves in something of a paradox on the new Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Often most susceptible to external shocks yet more reliant on multilateral frameworks for stability. Their ability to survive and their influence hinges less on material power than on strategic adaptability, diplomatic agility and institutional alignment. This has been very evident within the Western Balkans, where joining NATO and the EU

has acted as security guarantees, and also as a means for domestic reform. The influence of small states, however, emerges from participation in institutions, and norm entrepreneurship rather than from their enforcement as emphasized by researchers such as Keohane (1969) and Thorhallsson (2018). In the Western Balkans, that has looked like a strategy of embedding national interests in Euro-Atlantic institutions that seeks to rely on collective legitimacy for power against an external one. This has enabled states such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania to increase their geopolitical significance by aligning with shared values and coordinating security policies.

The Ukraine conflict has confirmed this model in the past. It showed that security for small states cannot be divorced from the stability of the alliances to which they belong. North Macedonia's unwavering support for NATO and EU sanctions, its inclusion in collective defense ventures and its adherence to Ukraine's sovereignty have solidified the country's role as a credible actor in the Alliance. This is in stark contrast with the equivocal or non-aligned position of some regional neighbors and highlights for us again the idea that small-state credibility is a function of predictability and solidarity. Yet this dependence on collective paradigms is not without its problems.

As Ingebritsen (2006) points out, small states are caught between adaptation and autonomy, and the requirements of "formality of alliance" against one internal aspect of legitimacy. With the weight of regional history and identity politics, even more problematic for the Western Balkans to balance. Recent cases in North Macedonia, one of which relates to constitutional negotiations with respect to their Bulgarian minority, show how externality and internal political fragility intertwine as to test not only the resilience of reform but societal unity. In addition to security, resilience lends a valuable analytical perspective as well the concept of resilience.

In NATO and EU discourse, resilience goes beyond defense and includes economic steadiness, energy diversification, cyber security, political stability and democratic governance. In small states, resilience is necessary: it shifts vulnerability at an individual level to adaptive capacity. North Macedonia's persistent policies of governance reform, crisis management and regional coordination - particularly in the context of the Western Balkans Quad and Berlin Process - suggest a growing recognition that resilience is a strategic asset rather than merely policy justification. Similarly, small states in the Balkans function as connective stabilizers. They are situated between larger powers and rival spheres of power and serve as buffers and bridges within the European periphery. By promoting cooperation and alignment with Euro-Atlantic values, they will promote

horizontal expansion of security - where that collective defence is matched by political coherence and societal preparedness.

Finally, the experiences of North Macedonia and its neighbors in the region show that the place of small states in today's security order is not marginal, but constitutive. They participate actively, legitimize Euro-Atlanticism, and make it inclusive, but not only so, making its success the cornerstone for the sustainability of the European project. In a context of widespread competition and hybrid threats that cross borders, small states represent the principle that collective security is as much about solidarity and trust as strategic deterrence.

Conclusions

North Macedonia's evolution in its Euro-Atlantic roles serves as a microcosm of the broader metamorphosis of small countries in an era of renewed geopolitical uncertainty. What started as an attempt to achieve membership and prestige has transformed into a testing ground for resilience, credibility and strategic influence. NATO membership ensured formal accession in the trans-Atlantic security system; however, its success will depend on the preservation of stability, of democratic rule and of political will in moving national interests toward common values.

The war in Ukraine and the changing geopolitical dynamics have driven the Western Balkans back to center stage of European calculation once again. In this sense, North Macedonia's adherence to Euro-Atlantic norms is more than something it proclaims; it constitutes an active demonstration of solidarity and dependability in an area where uncertainty so often prevails. Its participation in regional initiatives like Western Balkans Quad and Berlin Process is an example of this very deliberate process of turning alignment into proactive diplomacy – where vulnerability turns into influence.

The findings of this paper imply that the future of small states in European security will largely be determined by three connected forces. The ability to maintain reforms and institutional integrity at home - because credibility abroad depends on legitimacy within. Second, the capability to cope with hybrid challenges through coordination with allies and the development of resilience across governance, economy, and information domains. Third, a willingness to serve as constructive regional mediators and promote cooperation and stability as the public goods of the Euro-Atlantic system. To that end, this study expands our perspective on North Macedonia from a mere aligned success to a strategic case of adaptive small-state actions. Its experience reveals how limited power can be leveraged into meaningful agency through diplomacy, institutional participation, and value-based cooperation. This model has lessons for other Western Balkan

countries facing similar challenges in balancing external expectations with internal pressure.

North Macedonia's Western journey remains a "difficult passage" - not because it is unsure where it is going, but because the challenge of sustaining change is multifaceted. Its success won't be scored by either symbols of membership or milestones, but rather the extent to which the system can deepen its resilience as a democratic and the trust which citizens will put in it along the process. In this sense, this country's journey mirrors a bigger truth for the region: that the strength of Europe's periphery decides the endurance of its center.

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