
NATO URGED TO STRENGTHEN PRESENCE IN BALKANS

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Balkan Insight

NATO leaders in Tirana welcomed Montenegro's membership, spoke of the need to bring Macedonia closer to the alliance - and called for a robust response to an assertive Russia.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly, held for the past three days in Tirana, has put the Western Balkans in the spotlight and has emphasized that further improving regional security depends on continued Euro-Atlantic integration.

During Monday's plenary session, the president of the NATO Assembly, Michael Turner, said the Alliance and the EU had brought security and stability to the Balkan region and had helped it to overcome the conflicts brought about by the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Turner said he also believed that Russia had started to act more aggressively, and that NATO has to raise its presence in the region to isolate the risks.

"It is no secret that Russia is seeking to divide us... and Moscow believes that it is better for them to work against us and not with us," he told more than 250 officials from the 28 NATO member countries.

NATO's Deputy Secretary General, Alexander Vershbow, said on Monday in Tirana that Euro-Atlantic integration was the key to stability in the Balkans, although he added that not every country in the region needed to seek NATO membership.

"We respect the choices of non-member countries like Serbia, as well as Austria, Sweden, and Finland, to pursue partnership rather than membership," he said.

"Neutral countries like Serbia play an important role in international peacekeeping operations and we appreciate Serbias contribution to the UN Missions in Cyprus and Lebanon, and to the EU missions in Africa," Vershbow said.

All the speakers welcomed Montenegro's path towards soon becoming the 29th member of NATO.

"NATO membership will strengthen Montenegros independence, which it regained 10 years ago, and will help to ensure Montenegros long-term stability and security," Vershbow said.

The Montenegrin Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic, who delivered a speech in the plenary session, agreed. "NATO accession is the guarantee that Montenegro will be able to steer its own future," he

said.

The Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, said that with Montenegro in NATO, the Adriatic was becoming an internal Alliance sea, in this way making Europe more secure.

Rama also stated that other Balkan countries like Macedonia should also embrace Alliance membership in time.

"We support Macedonia, like Montenegro, becoming anchored in the euro-Atlantic course," he said. "Albania is interested in this future being democratic, consolidated and prosperous," he added.

On Monday, NATO leaders were urged to boost the Alliances collective defences to confront an increasingly assertive Russia, and ensure that any aggression is met with a rapid response and reassure those allies that feel under threat.

Leaders were urged to develop a comprehensive strategy at the forthcoming NATO summit in Warsaw in July.

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