

NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy

Dear readers,

It is on moments like this one that we fondly look back at our journey towards the Euro-Atlantic community, to the club of European democracies, where Croatia so firmly belongs. Five years ago, Croatia achieved an important milestone in its modern history when it became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Later, of course, we celebrated our accession to the European Union.

It was a journey full of memorable moments but also of hard work, difficult decisions, and many obstacles. We had to strictly adhere to the Alliance's high standards in the areas of security and defence while also achieving political consensus and gaining public support.

This journey would have not been possible without the dedication of many colleagues, men and women, whose firm belief in a better future for Croatia led the way through a challenging path of necessary and sometimes difficult reforms.

Croatia has lived up to its commitments. Our troops in Afghanistan and Kosovo are extremely professional. Croatia is a keen supporter of NATO's Partnership and Open Door Policy. Croatia is an active member in over a dozen "Smart Defence" projects that help Allies share defence capabilities and coordinate efforts more effectively.

Based on Croatia's experience from this process, I strongly believe that full integration of our region into the Euro-Atlantic structures is the only way to ensure prosperity and stability in Southeastern Europe.

NATO remains committed to its Open Door Policy and strongly encourages all countries aspiring to NATO membership to continue in their ongoing reforms and to adhere to the accession criteria. The road of reforms can be long, and it can be bumpy, but it is still worth it – and

not just for NATO's sake. The road to membership, no matter how long it takes, is sometimes more important than the goal itself.

Many challenges remain, as our region is charged with many politically sensitive issues. However the strong leadership and commitment of the region's governments and people should counter these obstacles and anchor the countries firmly into Euro-Atlantic structures.

NATO brings great benefits to its members: the security guarantee of collective defence; participation in one of the world's great peacemaking forces, and a full, equal voice at the table of leading Euro-Atlantic democracies, helping to shape the security of this continent.

Security cannot be taken for granted – and this is not just an empty slogan. Again and again, we have seen that peace and prosperity do not simply appear out of nowhere. Defence capabilities matter. This was evident following the terrorist attacks of 11 September against the United States. Over the past few months, as we have witnessed a crisis unfold in Ukraine, we have seen a new security situation develop in Europe – one that is less predictable and more dangerous.

For those who believe that NATO is a Cold War relic, the current events in Ukraine should be a clear signal that the Europe whole and free is still not accomplished.

During its 65 years of existence, NATO has repeatedly proved to be an indispensable part of Euro-Atlantic security, peace and prosperity. The Alliance has taken on new missions, developed new capabilities, welcomed new members and engaged with new partners. As NATO encountered new threats, it rose to the challenge, learned the lessons, and moved forward.

For 65 years, NATO has been the global gold standard for international security cooperation. With Croatia's support, the Alliance will continue to play that vital role.

The Croatian people benefit tremendously from NATO membership, and I can tell you from experience that the Alliance also benefits from Croatia's significant contributions. NATO needs committed members that are ready to carry the responsibility of advancing peace and prosperity for all citizens of Euro-Atlantic area. I am proud that Croatia has met that challenge.

Ambassador Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović

