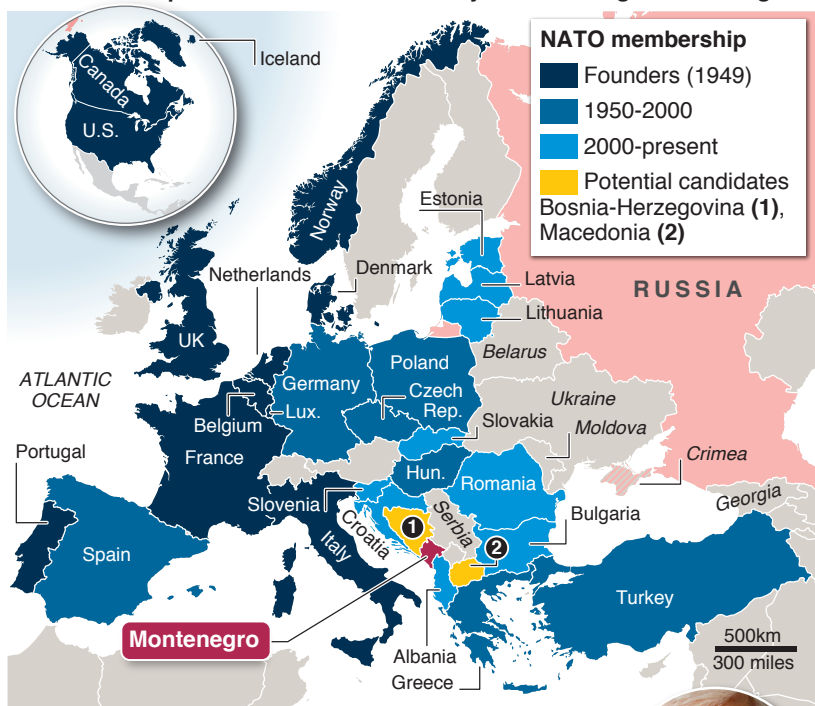


Montenegro defies Russia to join NATO

NATO is set to expand for the first time in eight years by welcoming Montenegro into the alliance. Russia says NATO's steady expansion into eastern Europe threatens its own security and cannot go unchallenged



■ **Montenegro:** Part of communist Yugoslavia until 1992. Joined with Serbia, first as **Federal Republic of Yugoslavia**, then as **Serbia and Montenegro** after 2003. Independent in 2006 after 55 percent of population voted for severing ties with Serbia

■ Montenegro has population of 632,000 and military of only 2,000 troops, but it is strategically positioned to give NATO full control of Adriatic coastline and of entire northern coast of Mediterranean

■ Prime minister **Dusko Markovic** says membership will bring regional stability. But public opinion remains divided, with pro-Russian opposition saying NATO entry is betrayal of traditional allies Serbia and Russia



■ Moscow considers Montenegro, whose population is mostly Slavic Orthodox, to be within its historic sphere of influence

■ Montenegro has accused Russia of being behind foiled coup in October allegedly designed to throw country off its path towards NATO