

Key Actors, Institutions and Decision-making in the Croatian Foreign and Security Policy

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Abstract

Building the security sector related institutions and organisations in Croatia as a part of the much wider democratic transition of the country at the beginning of the 1990s was a very difficult and not always and entirely a successfully implemented task, marked among other issues by the looming and protracted war and defence of the country. Unfortunately, during this process, up until today – one could even argue especially today – one of the most important weaknesses is the level of achievements in the fields of democracy, rule of law, human rights and political freedoms, already existing among the nations of the democratic world. It could be argued that even today, almost 30 years after achieving independence and spending the same time trying to reform its security sector (SSR), Croatia still has underdeveloped security institutions, comparatively low standards of transparency, accountability and openness. It is sometimes hard to say if security sector actors are dominating the political structures or the political structures are abusing and misusing security sector structures for their own purposes and benefits. Even worse, quite often it looks like political structures are not pursuing their policies for the benefit of the majority of the citizens, especially those vulnerable among them, but are pushing strongly to appease those with the most rigid and conservative political and societal agenda. Accession to NATO and the EU had some beneficial effects during the pre-accession period, when Croatia was obliged to show improvement in all required fields. Afterwards, it reverted to the prior state of affairs and even deteriorated in many respects.

Introduction

Croatia started its life as an independent state full of hope for a better future. According to some studies at the beginning of the 1990s, we were the third most successful and today we may be the second worst transitional state (PODGORNIK 2017). Great hopes were invested in the transition to a democratic political system as well as the introduction of the free market economy. Alas, unlike most other post-socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe, where the change of the political system signalled the starting point of deeper changes in their societies (ANDERSON et al. 2000), Croatia had to take a more difficult path, marked,

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among other elements, by the fight for its survival by military means, as well as the fight for recognition of its sovereignty and territorial integrity within the framework of international organisations and bilateral international relations.

Historical overview

The analysis of the process of the security sector reform (SSR) in the Republic of Croatia could be broadly divided into sections covering five major periods. The key events and activities undertaken during these periods mark more or less significant milestones that have determined the way Croatia – its society and political and security institutions developed. The periods to be considered are as follows:

- 1990–1995: Attack and aggression on the Republic of Croatia, the occupation of more than one quarter of the country's territory, the first multiparty elections, forming the Armed Forces and the intelligence agencies and other security-related institutions as a part of the much broader initiation of the national state building process
- 1995–2000: The end of the war and liberation of the occupied territories, peaceful reintegration of the rest of the occupied territories, death of the first president, Franjo Tuđman, and consequently the end of the reign of the HDZ (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – Croatian Democratic Union)
- 2000–2016: The end of the semi-authoritarian regime, changing the role and the authority of the President of the country and giving more strength and influence to the Government, ensued by three changes of government, the first of these subsequent governments led by the SDP (*Socijal-demokratska partija* – Social Democratic Party), the second by the HDZ, and the third by the SDP again; the beginning of what, at least initially, seemed like real transition, with the beginning of the process of accession to the Euro-Atlantic community (firstly accession to NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and later to the EU, the European Union)
- 2016 – present: Institutional hiatus and backwardness in terms of the social and ideological values informing governance in a broad sense, with the strong influence of a rigid conservative right wing (politicians and small political parties connected to the HDZ and the Catholic church)

Croatia's security sector and its armed forces in particular had been built from scratch, although the framework of the Republic's territorial defence and its militia from the time of the former Yugoslavia served as the first building blocks in the process. The first form of anything resembling the armed forces was created in the first half of 1991 under the auspices of the ZNG (*Zbor Narodne Garde* – Croatian National Guard).² ZNG was initially placed under the organisational and institutional structure of the Ministry of the Interior mostly because of political and legal reasons, while its units were under the operational command of the Ministry of Defence.

² The Decree of the formation of the Croatian National Guard was approved on 18 April 1991.

Obviously, the fact that two ministries were responsible for the same structure compounded to operational and practical problems encountered at the time. Additionally, the human capital of the newly formed structure was dubious at best, on the one hand because of the lack of trained military personnel in operational as well as staff positions alike, and, on the other hand, because a pretty visible friction existed between the so-called “new soldiers” and those inherited from the army of the previous state.

However, the most important hindrance, strongly felt not only during the war, or in the years immediately following the war, but even today, was the fact that the complete security sector structure was fighting in a very unfavourable environment for the protection of the state and its citizens, fighting obviously a much stronger and better-equipped adversary. In such an environment, given the almost sacrosanct importance of the security sector, its organisational structure and the quality of its personnel went undisputed. Coupled with democratic deficits inherited from the previous state, an atmosphere was created in which it was very difficult, even impossible, to promote the idea of democratic oversight of the security sector, while control over security institutions was abused to serve the needs and ideas of the then President and the ruling party (HDZ).

This was especially troublesome in case of intelligence and counterintelligence structures, whose personnel showed in way too many cases an almost criminal behaviour. For example, they frequently claimed apartments used by former or then members of the Army, confiscating their property illegally. Also, the lack of clear legal provisions, less than clear command authority and the overlapping authority of several state agencies effectively reduced the ability of civil society organisations and other components of the civilian sector to work for the benefit of citizens and society as a whole (ZUNEC–DOMISLJANOVIC 2000, 125).

So the first moment when there was a realistic possibility that Croatia could finally undertake the path of serious SSR and democratic institution building came only after the SDP-led coalition of six political parties won the parliamentary elections in the very beginning of 2000. They consequently ousted the HDZ from power, and soon after this their candidate, Stjepan Mesić, won the presidential elections. All of this happened following the sudden death of Franjo Tuđman.

Four key issues were needed to be solved in a fast and effective manner.

Firstly, during the first ten years of its existence, Croatia had a semi-presidential political system with a lot of power concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic and delegated by him to his staff, sidelining the Government in many issues. Parliament served as a mere rubber-stamping machinery for the decisions of the President.

Secondly, and following from the above, there was a need to finally place much more authority in the hands of the Parliament. Not only regarding the passing of legislation but also at least as importantly in shaping in general the policies and strategies pursued by the state institutions.

Thirdly, there was little in the way of opportunity for the civil sector or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to take a proper role in the process of preparations and public discussions of major decisions and strategic documents. This was key for the civil society to take its rightful role and position within the process of the democratic oversight of the security sector institutions and state bodies as a whole.

Fourthly, there was a need to try to catch up with the other transitional states on their way to accession to NATO and the EU. Because of the blindness of the leadership during

the first ten years of independence, being also, partially, the result of the protracted war, all attempts to join these two organisations were stalled to the point that external observers had to wonder if the Croatian leadership was actually expecting to be begged to join. Of course, this affected very negatively foreign and security affairs and relations, which was never more apparent than during the protracted quarrel with Slovenia about the border in the Bay of Piran or *Savudrijska vala*. Not to mention that this element also contributed greatly to the lack of an attempt to improve the state of affairs in the field of the democratic oversight of the security sector institutions. All of this contributed significantly to the overall lack of transparency and accountability of the security structures (ZUNEC–DOMISLJANOVIC 2000, 127–133).

Only the first issue has been more or less successfully resolved by stripping the President of the Republic of overly excessive powers. In the two other fields, progress has been symbolic at best, and there may have been backsliding, even, when it comes to the effort some politicians and parties invested in sidelining NGOs and in hindering their attempts to carry out their roles, by constantly reducing available financing and putting every imaginable obstacle in their way. At the same time, Croatia's accession to the EU has been dealt by crushing blows repeatedly, and only the agreement on international arbitration managed finally to calm down tensions, thus giving Croatia the opportunity to become member of the EU.

Instead of a serious attempt at SSR, there was a practical and pragmatic emphasis on the reduction, i.e. the downsizing of all security sector organisations, most notably the armed forces, coupled with overzealous attempts at cost-cutting, to the point where the sheer functionality of these organisations was imperilled. Military spending, for instance, which initially (during the war and shortly thereafter) reached more than 8% of GDP,³ has been reduced to approximately 1.5% of the GDP by today. There is a lot of talk every now and then that security and military expenditure in particular should be brought back to the level of 2% of GDP, which is considered by many as a requirement in NATO. However, it is not really clear at what costs to the other chapters of the state budget this could be achieved, having in mind the protracted, long-lasting economic crisis and stagnation that Croatia is passing through. While it cannot be disputed that the processes of reduction, reorganisation, cost-cutting and downsizing were necessary, unfortunately they were at the end presented and used as replacement, as "Ersatz" for the real transformation that would have been necessary.

What followed at home were constitutional changes that have taken place in the 2000s. These reduced the excessive authority of the President of the Republic. In the international arena Croatia began the process of accession to NATO, and later the EU, through the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). As an interim step, Croatia became a member of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) during the first half of the 2000s, and later became an active participant within the framework of the Membership Action Plan (MAP). This was to show to the nation "the light at the end of a tunnel" and to stimulate pro-European forces to undertake whatever was necessary to finally qualify Croatia for membership in the two organisations. After protracted negotiations made even more of a

³ Although this has to be taken with a grain of salt because during the war and the existence of the semi-presidential political system, it was very hard to obtain real figures which thus could have been quite possibly even bigger.

chore by right-wing conservative hardliners and their supporters within society, and also by blocks thrown frequently on our path to the EU membership by Slovenia because of the unresolved question of the borders, Croatia became a member of NATO in 2009 and a member of the EU in 2013.

Also during the same period, Croatia for the first time produced a National Security Strategy (Narodne Novine 2002), passed by the Parliament in 2002, and renewed after a lot of struggle and failed attempts mostly due to political manoeuvring in 2017. In the meantime, Croatia also passed a Strategic Defence Review in 2005, and again in 2013 (Narodne Novine 2013), and these documents were mostly taken as replacements for the National Security Strategy in the absence of its long-protracted update and upgrade. The most visible result of all the bargaining and the less than qualified discussions within the political structures among the media and the general public was the abolition of military conscription and the change to an all-volunteer force during the first half of the 2000s. Yet renewed attempts appeared at the time of writing this article by some politicians to promote a return to conscription.

In recent years, a major trend that may be observed is a conceptual shift, with less than fully understood and appreciated implications, to the notion and concept of homeland security, instead of national security and/or human security. This topic alone is something that could speak volumes about the intentions of at least a part of the political nomenclature, because it shows how our political leaders are more than willing to go wherever their counterparts from countries considered “strategic partners” would lead them.

Stakeholders in the decision-making process

The majority of the security sector institutions have been established in the years following independence, but obviously, the beginning of the process took place during the time of war. Clearly, a wartime environment does not represent the most favourable framework for such an endeavour. After the year 2000, however, finally some steps have been taken in the process of accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures. From that point onwards, the process of adjusting the institutional framework of the security sector went hand in hand with the processes of accession to NATO and the EU. The merger of these processes had strong beneficial effects for the development of the state institutions in general and the security sector structures in particular.

The main stakeholders, institutions and organisations alike, within the framework of the security sector are:

- The Croatian Parliament
- The Government of the Republic of Croatia
- The President of the Republic of Croatia
- The National Security Council
- The Office of the National Security Council
- The Council for the Coordination of Counterintelligence and Intelligence Agencies
- The Operational and Technical Centre for Surveillance of Telecommunications
- The Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia
- The Counterintelligence and Intelligence Agency

- The Military Counterintelligence and Intelligence Agency
- The Council for Civilian Oversight of Security and Intelligence Agencies⁴

The above list represents the result of the protracted changes within the security sector framework. During the last quarter of the century, some of the stakeholders were merged, cancelled or established anew, according to the needs and beliefs of the then political elites, and also according to the relative power of the political institutions and political parties. For instance, the National Security Council started its life as a National Defence and Security Council headed by the then President of the Republic, and only in 2002 became known by its present name when the Government got a more prominent role in deciding security matters. Also, initially there were four intelligence/counterintelligence agencies – two civilian and two military, and today there are two with attempts to move everything under the auspices of the so-called Homeland Security Structure.

While it could be interesting to speak at great lengths about the institutions themselves and their historical development, it is much more important to understand their roles, especially those focused on achieving democratic control and oversight of the security sector. The main institution tasked with legal and democratic oversight of the defence and intelligence structures is the Parliament as the legislative body.

However, the civilian oversight of the security structures is described very vaguely in the Constitution and the corresponding laws. Democracy may depend less on the occasional parliamentary and local elections. What may be more important is to have a firm structure of independent non-governmental organisations that will constantly monitor the development within and between the state structures and react accordingly if they notice abuse or misuse of power and authority.

The Parliamentary Council for Civilian Oversight of the Security and Intelligence Agencies is a body with representatives of almost all of the important branches of society (academia, civil society, media, etc.). It is supposed to play its role on behalf of the civil society, but in reality, it plays its role mostly to the “benefit” of the major political party/parties and its leadership. The HDZ is the biggest culprit here because formal and informal connections of the party leadership with members of the security agencies have been well documented and widely known publically. After all, heads of the important branches and departments within the security structures are dominantly coming from the ranks of the HDZ. Once it was established by civilian experts and analysts, its work had been faced with a kind of informal or unspoken disregard at the beginning of the 2000s, and the chairman of the committee had resigned. Worse, after this the Council continued its work, while officially not electing a new chairman, under the oversight of the Parliamentary Committee for Internal Affairs and National Security, which was a far cry from the initial intentions and expectations, and practically subjugated it to another body of nominally equal importance and position. It is clear that such a resolution of affairs for all the practical consequences abolished its democratic independency. Formally, democratic oversight exists, but the civil society is largely sidelined in the process.

⁴ These stakeholders represent only the most important institutions and do not represent the Security Sector in its entirety.

As it turned out, NATO and EU accession not only did not guarantee improvement in this field, but what happened after the accession was a serious reversion to the habits known from the times when Croatia had a less than democratic semi-presidential political system. Most notably, instead of following the path towards more transparency and cooperation with other societal structures, we are again witnessing sidelining of the media and preventing the NGO's from having any insight in what the agencies are doing, and especially how they undertake their job.

The civil society, with a multitude of NGOs, is today in a much worse position, and its chances to have considerable impact are almost negligible. They are suffering from a lack of capacity and an inadequate political culture in which they are not perceived as welcome and equal partners from the side of state administration. They are often derided by some politicians and media outlets as national traitors if they point a finger to discrepancies or wrongful acts committed by the state structures. The war veterans, a group that acquired a lot of non-institutional might and power within the society, have a multitude of organisations, and all the financing they could wish for, but they seem to be organised mainly for the purpose of taking care of their own financial interests (pensions, privileges, etc.). For instance, Vukovar city that was completely destroyed during the war, with its roughly 30,000 inhabitants has 28 different veteran organisations registered (BRADARIĆ 2015), while the number at the national level reaches hundreds. They care only for the perpetuation of their own positions and the suppression of any opposing thought that could possibly ask questions about their role and significance today. They are today mostly supporters of the most rigid and conservative forces and ideas within the society and political system.

The Croatian Intelligence Agencies are formally accountable for policy and operations to the Heads of the State and the Government, President and Prime Minister. During the first decade of the new millennium, their management and guidance fell under the authority of the National Defence and Security Council, which was an *ad hoc* body consisting of the President, the Prime Minister and other high-ranking officials responsible for defence and security. However, this Council held its meetings very seldom, mostly twice in a year, usually only when some exceptional events took place with potentially very alarming or scandalous implications.

The operational accountability of the intelligence and counterintelligence structures was the responsibility of the Council for the Coordination of Intelligence Agencies, which held sessions very rarely. Financial accountability was in the hands of the Government and Parliament.

As for Parliament and its role in the democratic/legal oversight of the Security sector, it has to be said that for a quite prolonged period of time parliamentary bodies did not have a professional staff capable of offering expertise and support to MPs on issues related to national security. The same situation existed within the Government, whereby some groups within the intelligence structures, both formally and informally, were taking on the role of expert and advisory groups. Obviously, this cannot be understood as an independent advisory mechanism.

All of these problems are underlined and made even more alarming having in mind the roles and authorities of the Parliament. The Croatian Parliament, being the highest body of the legislative branch of power, enjoys a number of authorities in the field of national security. The Croatian Parliament decides on war and peace and also adopts the National Security Strategy and the Defence Strategy (Narodne Novine 2001, Article 80). Other au-

thorities, which are given to the Parliament in accordance with the same article, are being worked out in detail in the acts concerning national security, which, as an issue, is more or less considered within the frame of defence activities. Based on such a classification, Parliament is authorised to “supervise the work of the Government of the Republic of Croatia and other holders of public authority responsible to the Croatian Parliament, in conformity with the Constitution and Law”. This illustrates that the Croatian Parliament has significant authorities in the field of national security.

The Constitution mentions some of the strategic documents and the role of the main political institutions in the process of their adoption, while the rest of the strategic doctrines, planning and operational documents, as well as the authorities and responsibilities of the political institutions, ministries and agencies in their preparation are prescribed by assorted Laws. For instance, the parliament is authorised to pass the National Security Strategy and the Defence Strategy of the Republic of Croatia (the already mentioned Article 80).

While this may be considered a terribly important issue by some authors and academics, in reality it does not matter so much. Although looking quite clear and democratically acceptable, some of these norms are the results of the overzealous attempt of the Parliament to have a dominant role in certain issues that should have been left to the executive branch. In case of the Republic of Croatia, it could be argued that this came in compensation for the first decade of independence, when Parliament has been neglected in dealings of the security sector, for which amends were made after the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000. The pendulum swung too far out on the other side, however, resulting in the outcome that the basic strategic, i.e. security and defence related documents were, and are still being passed by the Parliament.

The Parliament has the power of the purse in its hands, it appoints the ministers, it can start the process of revoking the whole Government, its Committees are strongly involved in the process of appointments of certain security and defence related officials as well as the preparation and advance discussion of security and defence policies, so it was not really necessary for the Parliament to insist on passing the country’s key strategic documents. By doing so, Parliament loses the possibility to hold executive branch officials responsible for creating and pursuing wrong security and defence policies, because at the end of the day they were created by the Parliament itself. Having in mind that the Parliament can start the process of discharging any minister or high ranking official if not satisfied with the underlying policy, including the approach to the strategic documents, its involvement in the passing of the same documents cannot be considered a necessary or optimal solution, because in effect this mixes the authorities and responsibilities of different branches of state power.

Because of the public and media perception that security/defence structures and their personnel defended Croatia and its citizens during the war, which gave them some special position and aura within the society, nobody was really willing to give the issue of democratic control and oversight the appropriate importance. Such a position sits well among some members of the security and defence structures, especially soldiers who actively participated in the war, because it perpetuates their own high regard for themselves and makes it easy for them to retain privileges.

Croatia spent a lot of time and effort in battles fought between the Government and the President over who should have the upper hand in the decision-making process. The President of the Republic is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed forces, and the Government (through

the institution of a civilian minister) is in control of the security and military institutions under the MoD – budget, planning etc. This makes for a pretty strange situation where the Commander-in-Chief is responsible for the defence of the country but does not have a say when it comes to the armed forces' or intelligence agencies' planning, financing and budgeting. Not to mention that certain defence, intelligence and foreign affairs acts have to be signed both by the President and the Prime Minister which serves as a constant source of tension between them (for instance appointing heads of the intelligence agencies or ambassadors).

It could be argued that the printed and electronic media is largely free and independent at first sight. However, a clear division can be seen among the media when it comes to support to this or that part of the political spectrum, in the form of a strongly partisan outlook. Additionally, reporters are also dependent on the owners of the media, who at the end of a day pay their checks. Therefore, it is not a rare occurrence to hear reporters arguing that the level of freedom they enjoy today is significantly smaller than what they had during the last 10–20 years of Yugoslavia, which was, as we all know, run by the Communist party. At the end, security and defence issues are covered by the media in a pretty partisan and fan-like manner, with only the potential scandals receiving serious treatment, while reporters in general simply do not have knowledge or expertise to cover the security sector professionally and impartially.

It would be simple to say that SSR in Croatia falls predominantly within the category of a post-authoritarian context (BRYDEN–HÄNGGI 2004). This could be almost true if we would not see authoritarian tendencies among certain political parties and certain politicians in power even today. Furthermore, there is still a feeling of a general lack of interest in the security sector, owing to the fact that the society is more concerned with issues related to economy, employment and the standard of living of citizens.

Cases

It is almost impossible to choose the best cases, or the worst for that matter – or the most important case of misjudged long-term decision, policy and/or strategy. There were so many of the latter that may be candidates for this dubious title.

A noteworthy case is most certainly the Croatian involvement in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), along with the creation of parallel Croatian authorities, in what was an internationally recognised state. It was true that at some point the existence and territorial integrity of the BiH were in serious question, but everything official Croatian authorities did, led by Franjo Tudjman and the HDZ traded the image of the victim in order to appease the long-standing historical aspiration to parts of this country among hardliner nationalists in Croatia and BiH.

All decisions and their operationalisation were made by a handful of top political leaders and military commanders, starting with late president Franjo Tudjman and his Minister of Defence, Gojko Šušak. Citizens, representatives of the civilian community, and even most of the state representatives were not only asked for their opinion, but also expected to support the execution of a policy fraught with dangers by turning the blind eye. It could be argued that it was during wartime, and, as usual in circumstances like that, interests of national security prevail over all other rational considerations.

The sad truth is that decisions like these affect negatively and adversely not only the development of democratic processes, but also the development of the society as a whole. This can be best seen taking into account the sad state and treatment of professional journalism, media as such, and reporters. While independent media are often sidelined or sued in courts for large sums of money for very dubious reasons, the so-called public media organisations, printed and electronic alike, are abused and misused for particular political purposes and made servants of the political elite and parties. In such a circumstance, it is impossible to expect events of security, defence or international affairs to be treated impartially and professionally.

However, faced with a need to choose, we can underline two decisions as serious contenders for a dubious title of failed decision-making process and consequent decision.

The first is the saddest state of affairs regarding the conscript or professionally based armed forces. During the first ten years of its independence, Croatia had a conscript based military. When the SDP-led coalition won the parliamentary elections at the beginning of the 2000s, we witnessed frequent statements of the then defence leadership that conscript service had to be abolished.

Nevertheless, what we saw was quite a hypocritical approach to solving this issue. What then minister of defence did was to relax heavily the criteria for the so-called civilian service of the conscript obligation. Basically, before that time potential conscript soldiers were allowed to serve they conscript obligation as civilians, working in hospitals, taking care of the elderly population, based mostly on their religious beliefs and in very limited numbers.

Usually, up until then there were a couple of hundred applications annually for civilian service. After relaxing the criteria for civilian service, the very next year the numbers surged to a couple of thousand, and the third year to almost one third of the usual annual number of conscripts (in a region of 15,000–20,000).

After that, the leadership of the Ministry of Defence flatly announced that the Defence Law and the Law on military service in the armed forces would be changed because obviously (!) people do not want to fulfil their military conscript service. It was clear that politicians did everything to set the environment and then to use the obvious and only possible outcome as a proof and vindication for pursuing their agenda.

It was even stranger because two other elements had to be considered to get a better picture. First, political structures pushed very strongly the idea that conscript service was too expensive, and consequently Croatia, as a country that endured war and by then spent ten years in economic crisis and recession, could not afford conscript service. For them, having professional armed forces from their point of view was much cheaper and cost effective.

However, having in mind the sad state of affairs regarding the neglect of the military infrastructure, barracks, and the even worse state of affairs of the military equipment and armament, it was very strange to hear such explanations. Add to that the fact that conscript service soldiers are not on a pay roll and professional soldiers have to be paid reasonably well to ensure them not only the quality of life in the barracks but also of their families, therefore, the line of thinking politicians expressed was striking.

Second, being a country that had to go through a considerable war experience, politicians from the left and even more from the right side of the political spectrum liked very much to emphasise, especially during the process of accession to NATO, and afterwards, that new downsized and more efficient armed forces will include and implement the les-

sons and values of the war of independence in future strategic, doctrinal and operational documents. Although it may seem logical and seductive, when it came to clear delineation what those values and lessons were, things became a little bit fuzzier. In fact, no one ever produced a clear and comprehensive set of those values and lessons, let alone proposed how to implement them unequivocally within the framework of the reorganised and restructured armed forces.

That is not to say there was not at least one lesson and/or value that could have been drawn from the experience of fighting the war of independence. At the beginning of the war, during 1991, most of the heavy equipment, tanks, artillery, helicopters and fighting airplanes were in the hands of the attacking Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). Croatian forces could rely only on the very scarce source of light equipment and hand armament thus far stowed for the use of territorial defence. However, there was no shortage of personnel because almost every Croatian citizen had to spend from 12 to 15 months as a conscript in the JNA. So, when the war broke out, we had a large pool of relatively well trained soldiers, not only foot soldiers but also those trained for some specialities, anti-aircraft defence, communications, artillery, armoured vehicles, etc., and those in their 20s or 30s, coming relatively recently from the military service, represented the first line of defence, soldiers that could put the relatively scarce equipment to a good and effective use. That process was fostered once the newly born military and police units managed to seize some ex-JNA barracks with some heavy equipment. However, as if by a stroke of pen, suddenly all the important security and defence political and professional structures reached consensus that conscript service is no more needed and thus preventing Croatia of the possibility to rely on the pool of trained people in some future possible conflict, however unlikely it may seem.

However, the story does not end there, because just these days we are faced with the attempt of the HDZ political elite to reintroduce conscript service as a part of training of the military personnel for the future. While it was relatively easy to abolish it 15 years ago, it is not clear how and at what costs to the society it would be feasible to reintroduce it today, and especially what could be the effects and benefits of such a decision. Having in mind with a grain of salt that there was a marked conceptual change and departure from pursuing national security, accepting instead the concept of homeland security, one could only conclude that as the first decision had nothing to do with the eventual effectiveness of the armed forces, today's attempt to reintroduce conscript service and embrace the notion of homeland security, as some of our senior strategic partners from the international security also did, marked only the political agenda both in appeasing our partners while at the same time pushing the nation back towards a serious attempt of complete militarisation of all spheres of the societal and individual life.

The second decision fraught with problems and inconsistencies is the long protracted but relatively recently resolved (we will see how durable it is) issue of re-equipping the Air Force with new fighters. The Croatian Air Force is very small and the fighting element of this force relies heavily on the small fleet – at the best of times of double digits – of ageing MiG-21s. While usually there were 10–15 on paper, not more than half of this number was ever operationally capable. For instance, when Franjo Tudjman died while being the President of the country, during his burial ceremony three MiG-21s presented an honorary flypast, and these three were to the best of our knowledge half of the operationally capable fighters at that specific day.

There were occasional discussions during the last 10–15 years, within the armed forces and also in the public sphere about the need to buy one squadron of new fighters to retain the operational capability of protecting Croatian skies. In all the cases so far, these discussions would dwindle because no government so far had the courage, or better call it impertinence, to seriously think about purchasing new aircraft and spending intolerable amounts of money in such a grave economic situation.

Suddenly, the HDZ-led government started negotiation with a number of foreign companies requiring their official offers. At the end, the list was cut to two possible contenders, the Swedish Gripen and the Israeli modified American F-16. The Swedish company offered brand new aircraft while the Israelis offered second hand, highly modified and very extensively used aircraft. In defiance of common sense, the Government passed a decision recently and accepted the Israeli offer. Politicians pushed forward the point that the Israeli offer was cheaper. Nevertheless, it was only half of the truth because the cost of the aircraft alone was truly cheaper, but the lifetime cost of the Israeli offer was slightly larger. This fact gains even more importance having in mind that the life expectancy of the Israeli aircraft is just half of the life expectancy of the Swedish offer at best.

However, the Government also made a strong propaganda claiming that offset programs offered by Israel were better and more extensive. But, since no one was really able to see the content of those offers, because of its secretive nature, it is very hard to confirm or reject this claim. All of this reinvigorated fears among the public that we are again faced with an attempt of hiding information because at the root of the whole affair is again some kind of corruption. While this may or may not be true, it is hard to suppress such an opinion as long as contracts like this are hidden from the public and a less than satisfying level of transparency is obtained.

So, the needs of the society are being completely dismissed and today we witness the reversion of all the processes we believed we successfully implemented during the times we were fighting to pass the scrutiny of the international community when we were in the midst of pre-accession talks with NATO and the EU.

Both decisions, conscript service and acquiring new fighter aircraft, were taken away from the influence of public and both could be only regarded as a way to appease our international partners while at the same time pushing forward the militarisation of the society as a whole. As such, both decisions fit nicely within the general and very visible pattern of changing the concept of security from National to Homeland... whatever that may mean.

Conclusion

The history of building security policy and its institutions in Croatia is mostly a history of lost opportunities and failures linked with occasional hopes in a better future before us. Unfortunately, instead of democracy, the build-up of the economy and overarching societal development, the result of this process for now is ideological backwardness, the strengthening of the discriminative tendencies in society, corruption, and a political elite that is only looking after its own interests, be they at home, in the short run, or in getting lucrative positions in the EU and NATO institutions sometime in the future. It has to be said that the HDZ is the main and most important, although not the only culprit setting the

tone for such a development. There are strong signs they are not, and do not want to be just one of the political parties – instead they behave and run politics using semi-authoritarian methods, while at the same time using and abusing each and every initiative within the wider societal network of independent institutions and organisations, from church to the very strong veteran groups. As a result Croatia, including its security policy, became a part of backward, conservative trends, not realistically sharing European democratic and civil values, running instead politics in accordance with what a few politicians think might best suit their needs. Buying Israeli planes, reintroducing the conscript service, tightening the grip around the citizens' rights and liberties by introducing the concept of homeland security, discriminating minorities, fighting immigrants, preventing the media from having regular and correct information, destroying the NGO community financially, setting the tone and environment for corruption and pursuing clientelism serve the short term interest of the most rigid and most powerful societal groups, and consequently serve the best interest of the most prominent part of the political elite to remain in the chair for as long as possible.

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