

The Changing Role of NATO and EU CSDP in Central European Security – The Case of Croatia

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Introduction

The EU and NATO accession process had a paramount importance for the transition process in Croatia. It was not only important for the reforms the country had to undertake, but also for the processes of identity-building and strategic alignment to the transatlantic community. The urge to align to “the West”, as a sign of final detachment from the socialist past and Balkan environment, somehow overshadowed the cleavages between “Atlanticists” and “Europeanists” in the Croatian security discourse.

The most important aspect of the entire discourse was a wider recognition of the fact that Croatia as a small country with relatively limited resources, especially taking into account the post-conflict character of the country, actually had no alternatives to the concept of co-operative security. Therefore, conceptualising its own national security, especially taking into account regional and wider international challenges, was feasible only in a wider transatlantic framework.

The current environment raises many questions with regards to the future concept of European security due to the decreasing U.S. commitment to it and increasingly complicated challenges in the East and South that dramatically shook the solidarity in the transatlantic community. The strategic reconfiguration in the wider European security space affects Croatia as well, especially due to its geostrategic position and the neighbouring Western Balkans region that has not finished the transition processes yet and is therefore open for strategic arm-wrestling of big global powers.

This paper will analyse the way Croatia tackles current geostrategic challenges, the way it positions itself within the contemporary transatlantic community, how does it perceive the role of NATO and the EU’s CSDP as an emerging tool at the disposal of the EU to face current security challenges and threats. Hence, besides looking at national security and defence policies and importance of the EU’s CSDP and NATO for their contextualisation, this paper will analyse also the domestic discourse about the aforementioned issues.

General perceptions on NATO and CSDP

The political transformation in post-communist Croatia was driven by the aspiration to become a constituent of “the Western club”, besides the idea of regaining its sovereignty and statehood. The EU was perceived as an attractive model of political stability and economic

well-being, where membership is not easy to achieve but worth struggling for. On the other hand, NATO was regarded as an optimal framework for the functional conceptualisation of the national security in the long run. Basically, it was quite clear that the country with rather limited capacities would be incapable to individually guarantee its national security in a highly volatile and complex international environment. These two fundamental foreign policy orientations became “two sides of the same coin” in Croatia’s endeavour to become a full-fledged member of the transatlantic community and institutions.

Hence, from the very beginning, the traditional divide between “the Atlanticists” and “the Europeanists” was not relevant in the security discourse of the country. On top of that, the immediate security threat in the early 1990s only added to the urge to start conceptualising the national security in a cooperative way, leaving limited or no space whatsoever for the aforementioned divide. In such an environment, “the concept of neutrality” was never seriously regarded as an option, not to speak about other possible solutions, if any.

Therefore, fundamentally, Croatia opted for membership in the EU and NATO and started developing its security system in the post-communist and post-conflict period in accordance with basic principles of the transatlantic community. Given the complexity of the political and economic environment at the time when the country started its endeavour to join the EU and NATO, not to forget a difficult regional framework, the conditionality mechanism of both clubs and their extensive assistance in the initial phase of the process were rather important. Presumably, it is not necessary to explain in detail the importance of the guidance and assistance of the EU and NATO, as well as their particular member states, for the consolidation of the security sector of the newly established state in such an environment (BOŽINOVIĆ 2007).

Hence, the process of development of a new strategic culture that goes way beyond just drafting the main strategic documents and the action plans designed to ensure the appropriate implementation of actions along the lines of established priorities was conducted under the transatlantic umbrella which actually determined the framework of the security discourse in the period to come. All main strategic documents in the field of security and defence are actually highlighting the fact that Croatia is fundamentally conceptualising its security policy as a full-fledged member of the transatlantic community (both the EU and NATO), using all benefits that the concept of cooperative security offers to a country of size and capacities like Croatia, but also sharing responsibilities and duties that membership in the transatlantic institutions carries along.

Exemplary, the first paragraph of the foreword of the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia already recognises the importance of membership in the EU and NATO for the strategic policy development of the country: “After being internationally recognized as a country, we have reached our strategic goals of membership in the UN, NATO and the EU. Thanks to all these successes, the Republic of Croatia freely creates its strategic policies today, develops potentials using all available resources, and creates international policies together with its partners and allies” (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia 2017, 4).

Moreover, the first paragraph of its first chapter entitled *Introduction, vision and security concept* highlights the following: “Becoming a member of European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (hereinafter: NATO) member, we reached important foreign policy and security objectives, and, furthermore, set such conditions that provide the

Republic of Croatia with new economic, political and security development opportunities” (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia 2017, 5). It also recognises present and future obligations of the country stemming from the membership in both clubs: “It will continually take care of the members of Croatian people in other countries, develop its reputation and influence in the international environment, and participate in the making of international peace and stability as a member of the United Nations, European Union, NATO and other international and regional organisations” (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia 2017, 5).

Additionally, the document also recognises the shared threats and challenges in its chapter dedicated to security threats, risks and challenges: “The Republic of Croatia, as a member of the European Union, belongs to a group of states of developed democracy, with which it shares common European values. In addition to the benefits derived from the membership, the Republic of Croatia and its partner states share security challenges as well. [...] The Republic of Croatia, due to its geopolitical location and being a member of the European Union and NATO, has been affected by geopolitical confrontations. Thus, it has been exposed to political and intelligence activities of state and non-state actors, which perceive the European Union and NATO as a security threat or a challenge” (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia 2017, 9).

The second relevant document in this sphere, the – *Strategic Defence Review* – emphasises the importance of Croatia’s membership in both the EU and NATO and its dedication to taking full responsibility within both frameworks in contributing to security on different levels: “For Croatia the membership in NATO is not perceived as new security dimension, it presents much more, because it brought Croatia a political recognition in terms of adoption of the high democratic standards and readiness to defend them; it is the act of acknowledgement of Croatia’s contribution to building international security, as well as of the efforts invested in the ongoing defence reforms. Membership in the EU further strengthened the position of the Republic of Croatia through the powerful process of integration into the common European structures, including security. Through participation in the international peacekeeping operations and missions under the leadership of NATO, UN, and the EU, by contributing forces or other forms of co-operation and development of the Armed Forces and regional military cooperation, the Republic of Croatia established itself as a responsible and credible member of the international community, as an ally fulfilling its obligations and contributing to security at the regional and the global level” (Strategic Defence Review 2013, 2).

Obviously, the clearest display of the role of NATO and the EU for any given country can be found in its fundamental strategic documents, as well as the country’s main strategic objectives in both pre-accession and post-accession period. This becomes even more relevant if we take into account that these umbrella documents are actually pre-defining all documents that follow, due to the fact that they have to be aligned accordingly. In Croatia’s case, it clearly confirms the argument that the EU and NATO, while maintaining a functional difference among themselves in the security realm, are not an “either or solution” for the conceptualisation of the national security in the contemporary international arena (DROZDIK 2010).

In addition to that, due to the reasons derived from the way the country gained its sovereignty and the fact that the transatlantic community represented an opposite scenario

to the communist past in a dysfunctional federal state, the opinion polls about the EU and NATO remain relatively stable, if not high, regardless of the recorded criticism towards the failures of the two to tackle contemporary challenges and threats. Hence, regardless of the recent turbulences in the transatlantic community, that framework still has no viable alternatives in Croatia's security discourse.

Institutional relations since 1989

Unlike the CEEC, Croatia had a more difficult path in the elementary stage of the transition process. Instead of "just" changing the nature of the political system over the course of the first free multi-party elections, it had to fight at both domestic and international level for its internationally recognised sovereignty. At home, it was fighting the several times stronger military rival that had occupied almost a third of its territory, while at the international arena, it was fighting for the recognition of its newly established statehood.

Unfortunately, relations with the EU and NATO were also reflecting the security dysfunctions on the ground and the country was more of "an object" in international affairs at that time, so the process of accession to both institutions was stalled. Only after the liberation of the occupied territories in its central part and peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, as well as the changes that followed the 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections was Croatia able to start undertaking important transitional reforms which slowly but steadily brought the country back to the path of transitional reforms.

The process of accession to NATO actually started as early as 2000 with Croatia's accession to the Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme. One of the country's most demanding endeavours in the first phase of the accession process was the security sector reform (SSR) in the post-conflict period. Namely, after the conflict, the security services needed a substantial downsizing and reformation in order to be economically sustainable and capable to undertake new challenges in the wider transatlantic framework of co-operation. Due to significant democratic deficits of the incumbent political elites, the government in the early 2000s had to invest a lot into the reformation of the entire political system (from semi-presidential to the parliamentary) and into the democratic oversight of the security sector in particular. In that regard, the strengthened role of the parliament and civil society was of utmost importance for the functional oversight mechanisms and accountable security sector. The extensive scrutiny and assistance provided by NATO and its member states within the framework of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) and Planning and Review Process (PARP) proved to be crucial in helping the country to advance to the final stage of the accession process which was successfully concluded in 2009 when Croatia became a full-fledged member. For example, the Hungarian Embassy in Zagreb played a very important role of NATO contact point for Croatia.

In the early 2000s, Croatia was seriously trailing behind the CEEC countries who have already signed their European Agreements with the EU and have undertaken serious reform efforts in their processes of accession to the EU and NATO. Nevertheless, the 2000s marked a turning point in the EU's policy towards countries in the region who have not yet had any contractual relations with Brussels. The so-called Stabilisation and Association Policy (SAP) was introduced at the Zagreb Summit in November 2000, offering a membership

possibility to all countries in the region once they meet the demanding accession criteria. The SAP policy package also brought to the table a very substantial financial and expert assistance to countries in the region that should foster the reforms process ahead of them. As a consequence, at least in case of Croatia, the reforms and accession processes have gained a new momentum and the country has signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2001, became a candidate for EU membership in 2004 and officially opened the negotiation process with the EU in 2005. The negotiation process itself was occasionally stalled either by Croatia's lack of capacity and will to deliver the results of the reforms or by the EU's growing internal challenges and enlargement fatigue. However, regardless of all obstacles, the country managed to finalise the process successfully and became a full-fledged member of the European club in 2013.

The membership in the EU and NATO has not only changed the international position of the country, enabling it to switch from being a security consumer in the 1990s into a noticeable security provider, a fully fledged member of the transatlantic community that frequently shows capacity to "punch above its weight" in its contribution to international peacekeeping efforts. What is even more important, the new international position of the country offers a possibility to use its comparative advantages for playing a crucial role in bridging the gap between the EU and NATO and (potential) candidate states in the region. Namely, the absence of language barrier, geographic proximity, common history and similar, if not the same, transitional problems make Croatia an excellent showcase and supporter for the Euro-Atlantic ambitions of countries in its southeast neighbourhood.

This is an optimal way to show capacity for an active membership in both organisations and a concrete contribution to the efforts of the EU and NATO to ensure a long-term consolidation of this part of Europe. This goes well along with the track record of the high level of alignment of the Croatian foreign policy with both the CSDP and NATO's policies in the most challenging fields of contemporary international relations. Namely, unlike a significant number of countries in its closer and wider surrounding, Croatia showed capacity to "think outside of the national box" in a number of fields of common concern like relations to Russia, migration policy, fight against terrorism etc. However, like the majority of European NATO member states, it is still underperforming in the area of defence spending. According to SIPRI's Military Expenditure Database, Croatia's defence expenditure in 2016 and 2017 was at the level of 1.4% of GDP (SIPRI 2018). There is a dynamic ongoing public debate about the intention of the government to meet the required threshold of 2% of GDP in the period of five years. All these efforts have helped the country to build a different image within the transatlantic community as opposed to the one that it portrayed some two decades ago. On the other hand, the aforementioned political statements in its fundamental strategic documents, together with the concrete actions that have been undertaken by the country in the recent period, lead us to the conclusion that Croatia is firmly bound to the transatlantic concept of cooperative security that makes any alternative scenario highly unlikely in the foreseeable future.

The role of the CSDP and NATO in domestic political and military transition and reform

The process of accession to the EU and NATO in particular had an immense impact on the process of political and military transition and reform in post-socialist and post-conflict Croatia. The environment in the country itself was characterised with visible shortfalls of the democratic system, where political elites were showing limited or non-existent intentions to undertake necessary reforms in the field of the security sector and beyond. The dramatic consequences of the Homeland War, which were felt in every segment of life, obviously did not contribute to the overall functionality of the state system and its adaptability to the new environment and challenges. In other words, while Croatia managed to regain the territorial integrity only in 1998, which meant minimum ten years of delay for the start of a serious democratic reform process, this was obviously not the only reason for such a significant transformational setback. The democratic deficit of the government in power and the entire setup of the political system in the late 1990s was representing a serious burden for the country's Euro-Atlantic accession ambitions.

The entire political system of the country at that time was built around the strong position of the president, as an unquestioned leader of the governing party and a commander in chief of the military. "The French type" of semi-presidential political framework, burdened with the lack of adequate political culture of a newly established state, has actually made the level of democratic consolidation of the state almost entirely dependent on the political will of the governing party.

A cumbersome post-conflict period and a lengthy process of retrieval of territorial integrity, coupled with the aforementioned democratic deficits, obviously did not make the 1990s optimal for transitional reforms required for the accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures. If we add to that a non-existent policy framework for the countries of the region by either of the two institutions from "the Western hemisphere", it seems obvious that the last decade of the previous century was lost for a country like Croatia. Therefore, "the real transition" started in 2000 with political changes in the country and introduction of policy frameworks, especially those of the EU, that foresee a possibility for full-fledged membership after meeting the required criteria (KNEZović et al. 2011).

In that context, the new momentum of Euro-Atlantic accession processes brought with the changes in the domestic and international political arena have highlighted a crucial role of the EU and NATO policies and conditionality for the democratic transition in the country.

One of the crucial preconditions for a new start was a structural change in the political system, i.e. reductions of the unnecessarily strong position of the president and improvement of the position of parliament in it. It was also important to depoliticise the bodies of state that have represented the bastions of nationalist party support for the past decade, in order to create reliable institutions and be able to bring under parliamentary scrutiny especially the army, police and security services. The constitutional changes that have taken place in the 2000s contributed to the creation of a more efficient future state apparatus, compatible with the difficult tasks of reform process and EU and NATO accession before it (KNEZović et al. 2011).

At the very beginning of the 2000s, Croatia became part of a new EU policy package towards the region, entitled *Stabilisation and Association Policy*, encompassing extensive

financial, material and expert assistance to different aspects of transitional reforms within the process of EU integration. While at that time the newly established ESDP had limited or no impact on the transformation process in Croatia itself, the civilian and military missions to be deployed within the framework of ESDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo in the following years have represented a cornerstone for the post-conflict stabilisation and a functional departure point for the viable transformation process. Almost regularly, the double-hattedness of EU representatives in those states mirrored an intention to combine the stabilisation and association, i.e. the smooth transition from the first to the second cycle and hence secure the irreversibility of the transition process (LUCARELLI–MANNERS 2006).

Croatia profited immensely from participation in the Stabilisation and Association Process as it provided various tools that have facilitated the process of democratic transition. On top of that, the SAP itself has contributed to the creation of an entirely different political environment, marked by EU integration enthusiasm and driven by the Europeanisation process. This has helped the country to steadily change its international profile and embark on participating in the EU's CSDP missions already as a candidate state. This was a clear sign that the country has managed to switch from being a security consumer in the 1990s to being a security provider in the 2000s which was another display of a successful transition process and dedication to joint peacekeeping efforts of the EU in the region and beyond.

As it was highlighted before, since the CSDP missions have not been deployed to Croatia, like in other countries in the region, it is difficult to argue about the direct impact of the CSDP on the process of consolidation in the country. However, the participation in CSDP missions has significantly improved the interoperability of its security sector and Croatia's image at the international arena. In that regard, practical experiences of its security forces from the recent military conflict and the know-how related to that (de-mining, police and military training, post-conflict policies) have contributed to the overall leverage of Croatia's contribution to the EU's peacekeeping activities. Croatia has participated in more than twenty different civilian and military missions around the globe over the course of the last twenty years and is currently deploying around 550 personnel in ongoing missions (MVEP 2018).

The NATO accession process has had a more palpable impact on the transformation of the security sector. The PfP framework that Croatia joined in the early 2000s has opened numerous mechanisms that were useful for the reform process in the security sector. Once again, it is very important to highlight the fact that Croatia, unlike other Central European states, was not only post-socialist at that time. It was also post-conflict, with an oversized security sector and budget allocated for it that had a symbolic importance in the Croatian society. The SSR of the post-conflict Croatia was more a security sector reduction due to economic reasons than the security sector reform, a concept known to the developed Western democracies. The reason for that was a significant democratic deficit of the government in the 1990s that was using the security sector extensively for its own political purposes.

Therefore, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of NATO policies and political/symbolic significance of the accession process to the alliance for the introduction of a real SSR in the country at the turn of the millennium. Not only have the PfP and its mechanisms provided concrete assistance to Croatia's SSR efforts, but also increased bilateral cooperation with individual NATO member states, who helped a lot with their experience and know-how (HENDRICKSON–RYAN 2006).

The country profited immensely from participation in the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) and the Membership Action Plan (MAP). The first one “aims to promote the development of forces and capabilities by partners that are best able to cooperate alongside NATO Allies in crisis response operations and other activities to promote security and stability. It provides a structured approach for enhancing interoperability and capabilities of partner forces that could be made available to the Alliance for multinational training, exercises and operations. The PARP also serves as a planning tool to guide and measure progress in defence and military transformation and modernisation efforts” (NATO 2014). The second one, on the other hand “is a NATO programme of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. Countries participating in the MAP submit individual annual national programmes on their preparations for possible future membership. These cover political, economic, defence, resource, security and legal aspects. The MAP process provides a focused and candid feedback mechanism on aspirant countries’ progress on their programmes. This includes both political and technical advice, as well as annual meetings between all NATO members and individual aspirants at the level of the North Atlantic Council to assess progress, on the basis of an annual progress report. A key element is the defence planning approach for aspirants, which includes elaboration and review of agreed planning targets” (NATO 2018). The details about pre-accession mechanisms clearly show why they are so valuable for the post-socialist and especially post-conflict states. The guidance, material assistance and know-how in the field of SSR and beyond were of fundamental importance for the feasibility of the entire accession endeavour.

The entire NATO accession setup was of fundamental importance for the post-conflict reform of the defence system in particular. Primarily, the country has managed to downsize its military from more than 180,000 personnel in the second half of the 1990s to the number of 16,000 professional in the late 2000s. It also abolished the conscript system and territorial concept of defence, as well as succeeded in making the troops internationally interoperable that was clearly visible in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. When it comes to the legislative reform, other than adopting paramount strategic documents quoted before, the country has adopted all relevant laws and by-laws in the NATO accession period. Croatia entered the first cycle of the Membership Action Plan with a surplus of military personnel, large reserve forces, territorial structure of defence, dispersed command structure, obsolete weapons and equipment, with no development or procurement plans and lacking strategic vision (BOŽINOVIĆ 2007). The current situation in the Croatian military, while being far from perfect, clearly shows a significant progress that has been achieved in all areas listed above.

The bilateral co-operation with some member states, especially with the most influential ones, has been very important due to numerous reasons. First of all, their political relevance in the wider transatlantic space was not something to be underestimated. Second, the gradual transfer of know-how (education and planning) and technology was fundamental for the development even of basic capabilities on the Croatian side in order to be able to undertake necessary reforms and new challenging tasks. In that regard, since the country was undertaking an entire shift of security strategy and doctrine, the models of strategic documents, important legislature and implementation plans were more than useful for Croatia.

This all have resulted in relatively fast track approach to meeting almost all of the technical requirements for accession and a very significant participation in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, where Croatia's contribution was highly valued. With that, it significantly punched above its weight and increased its international relevance, as well as supported its image-building process to the maximum possible extent.

Policy field-specific relations

Croatia's strategic orientation towards EU and NATO membership implies a dedication to the concept of cooperative security. While it was evident that a country of limited capacities, especially one that was post-socialist and post-conflict, can profit significantly from membership in the aforementioned two institutions, it was clear that it also has to contribute to the concept it adheres to. One of aspects of that obligation is the participation in the EU and NATO-led peacekeeping missions.

As for the CSDP missions, the capacity of the EU to contribute to peacekeeping missions in its closest vicinity (the Western Balkans) and beyond will be determinant of its image at the international political arena. The successful regional economic integration obviously has to do more in the field of defence and security if it desires to be treated as a relevant international player in an increasingly volatile environment (MISSIROLI 2017). In that sense, its newest member state has to maximise its efforts to contribute to achieving that goal. In practical terms, Croatia started participating in the CSDP missions as early as in 2009, prior to its EU accession in 2013. Its first deployment was with the mission Atalanta, where one officer boarded a French frigate. The decision of the Croatian Parliament had authorised the deployment of up to 25 military personnel to the mission in 2017. They have also spent time on navy ships of Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany, but also in the mission headquarters in Westwood (U.K.). With this, the country not only strengthened the EU's crisis management capacities, but also the wider regional maritime security and combat against piracy. Croatia also took part in the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali, donating weapons to Mali armed forces and providing training and strategic guidance for the security sector reform. Croatia also contributed to the EU Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan), delivering support to the evolution of a manageable and functional civil police at the national level. Its staff were involved in different activities related to police reform, training and institution-building process. Croatia also took part in the EU Monitoring Missions (EUMM) in Georgia, with the aim to promote stabilisation and confidence-building in the post-conflict period. Its primary responsibility was the monitoring and prevention of the re-emergence of military conflict along the administrative demarcation line. Croatia's participation started in 2014 with the deployment of a few police officers, who are still actively serving in the mission. Since 2014, the country is also taking part in the EUPOL COPPS, a civilian mission of the EU in the area of the Palestinian administration, with the task to support the processes of institution-building, police reform and buildup of the rule of law, where it has deployed a smaller number of police officers.

Perhaps the most relevant contribution of the country to the CSDP missions is the one undertaken in the region of Southeast Europe. Namely, in mid-2008, Croatia made a decision to deploy police officers to the EU mission in Kosovo (EULEX), with the goal to support

Kosovo in its attempts to develop a sustainable and functional institutional setup in the field of the rule of law, with a special focus on the judiciary, customs and police. Basically, Croatian officers were providing education, consultancy and supervision in the process of the development of the police sector. This contribution not only represented an attempt to strengthen the capacity of the CSDP in general, but also a substantial investment in the regional stability of Southeast Europe.

Attempting to show unreserved support and contribution to the development of CSDP capacities in different fields, Croatia took part in the Nordic EU Battlegroup 2011 and the EU Battlegroup 2012 led by Germany. Encouraging practical experience has driven the country into the decision to participate in this project every four years. Being a smaller member state, it opted for the so-called Framework Nations Concept in which states of comparable size and capacity to the one of Croatia gather around the leading nations. The latter in principle are states with larger capacity, which are deploying their forces on a permanent basis, hence taking the role of the leading nation in the designated battlegroup.

The most recent contribution of the Croatian forces to the CDSP endeavours is related to the decision of the Croatian Parliament of June 2017 to authorise the deployment of military personnel to the Operation EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA. The mission is being conducted in the Central and Southern Mediterranean, with the aim to foster the development of crisis management potentials in combating illegal immigration to Southern Europe (MVEP 2017).

When it comes to the NATO-led missions, Croatia was punching above its weight from the very beginning, trying to cement its close relations with the U.S. and remove last doubts about its NATO accession perspective. Namely, similarly as in the case of the EU, NATO membership brought lots of profit within the framework of cooperative security, but also requirements from members of the Alliance and especially those in the process of accession. Croatia started contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan as early as in 2003, with the deployment of its first contingent ever to an international military mission outside the UN framework. From that time on, when it first deployed fifty military police officers, the country contributed to ISAF with twenty contingents altogether and more than five thousand officers in fifteen years, which significantly contributed to the image of a reliable and interoperable security provider, offering a wider range of services – from training Afghan military forces to helping develop the educational infrastructure in the society. The ISAF mission was replaced in 2015 with the mission Resolute Support and Croatia's contribution continued until the present. It is important to mention that the Croatian contingent also consists of representatives of the U.S.–Adriatic Charter members (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia).

From the initial phase of the crisis in Ukraine, Croatia completely aligned its position with the major policies of the transatlantic community, including the sanctions against the Russian Federation and participation in NATO's mission "Enhanced Forward Presence" in Poland and the Baltic states. It is important to mention that, given the capacities of its security sector, the contribution to the aforementioned NATO's mission is everything but symbolic. Namely, in the battlegroup led by Germany that is operating with Lithuanian forces (in Rukla, Lithuania), Croatia participates with 187 troops (one mechanised infantry company with fifteen PARTIA armoured vehicles and one M-ATV mine-resistant vehicle). Furthermore, in the battlegroup led by the United States that is operating with Polish forces (in Orzysz, Poland) it participates with 72 troops (one self-propelled rocket launcher battery).

Croatia's engagement with the NATO conflict management activities in Southeast Europe has been conducted within the framework of the KFOR mission in Kosovo. The first deployment was made in 2009, with twenty officers and two transport helicopters. Based on the decision of the Croatian Parliament of 2015, the staff number could grow up to thirty-five, with the possibility of rotation. Its main tasks are transport of the KFOR forces, cargo and VIP persons and the contingent is under direct command of the operation's commander.

Having in mind the aforementioned contribution, especially taking into account the limited capacities of the country, one can conclude that Croatia has been actively supporting endeavours of both the EU and NATO in the field of peacekeeping and conflict management. While, at least when it comes to political statements of high-ranking officials, they are equally relevant for the efforts of the transatlantic community to consolidate turbulent regions, the comparative figures (number of staff and material resources invested) show that Croatia has estimated that one NATO-led mission in Afghanistan have had more leverage than all EU-led missions we mentioned before. This is obviously due to two facts – the perception of the CSDP as a project in development and the relevance of the U.S.-led NATO as the most important military-political alliance, regardless of the serious challenges before it. Of course, the dynamism of contemporary international relations keeps them very unpredictable, so only time will tell what type of balance we would have in the period to come and how would a country of the size and capacity of Croatia try to position itself *vis-à-vis* the new developments. Either way, while it is difficult to foresee the position of Croatia in that regard, it is quite clear that the transatlantic concept of cooperative security will hardly have any alternatives for the country in the period to come.

Conclusions

Croatia's state-building process has been cumbersome and lengthy. Fighting in parallel for international recognition at the international arena and many times a stronger enemy in strive for regaining territorial integrity has been challenging for the newly established administration in the post-Cold War period. Significant democratic deficits of the political elites in the 1990s have obviously not helped in that regard at all. The post-conflict environment has left the country with a huge and inefficient security sector, incapable of tackling new challenges in the transatlantic framework.

Only after the political changes of the early 2000s, both in the country and in the policy framework of the transatlantic community, has Croatia started its real transitional reforms and the accession process to the EU and NATO. Given the political, administrative and economic capacities of the country in that period to individually undertake demanding reforms, the role of Euro-Atlantic institutions and their individual member states cannot be overestimated. On top of that, as in the case of any other state in its accession phase, a large share of Croatia's transitional reforms would have never taken place without the conditionality mechanism of the EU and NATO. Additionally, the idea of belonging to the western political club was one of main drivers of Croatia's state-building process and one of the most important "tools" for detachment from "everything that was related to the former eastern bloc". Hence, the strong identity correlation with the transatlantic community has obviously determined also

the persistent political will of the country to adjust to the maximum extent with policies of the transatlantic community, especially in the field of security and defence.

Therefore, in case of Croatia, the division between “the Atlanticists” and “the Europeanists” barely ever existed in the national security and defence policy discourse. However, the comparative analysis of Croatia’s participation in civilian and military missions abroad (more Croatian staff in the ISAF than in all CSDP missions together) suggests that NATO under the U.S. leadership is being perceived as the leading global political-military alliance, while the CSDP still represents a project in development with many obstacles yet to overcome. However, with the changing trends in the transatlantic relations, it became obvious that the European leaders will be forced to develop certain preconditions for the security autonomy of their own in the period to come. The fine-tuning balance in the attitude of Croatia towards the security and defence policies in the western realm will depend predominantly on the positioning of the state between Washington and Brussels in the developing transatlantic security landscape. Whatever the outcome will be, it is quite certain that Croatia will firmly align to common policies *vis-à-vis* the other subjects of contemporary international affairs.

Therefore, it is reasonable to expect additional efforts on Croatia’s side to strengthen common EU and NATO policies, especially in the region of Southeast Europe, and further integration into the EU. The speed-up of the process to meet final technical criteria for Schengen membership, as well as serious achievements in the field of convergence criteria for the Eurozone, clearly confirm the arguments above. The country’s capacities and size, as well as its economic potentials and security environment, are leaving limited alternatives to the concept of deeper European integration and cooperative security.

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