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2018**Genesis of a Transatlantic Profile: The Case of Croatia***By Dr. Sandro Knezović***Introduction**

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

The political transformation in the post-communist Croatia was driven by the aspiration to become a constituent of 'the Western club', besides the idea of regaining the sovereignty and statehood.

Hence, from the very beginning, the traditional division between 'the Atlanticist' and 'the Europeanists' was not relevant in the security discourse of the country. On top of that, immediate security threat in the early 90s only added to the urge to start conceptualising the national security in a

cooperative way, leaving limited or no space whatsoever for the aforementioned division. In such an environment, 'the concept of neutrality' was never seriously regarded as an option, not to speak about other possible solutions, if any. 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.

The process of 'getting there'

Unlike the Central and Eastern European countries, Croatia had a more difficult path in the elementary stage of the transition process. Instead of 'just' changing the nature of political system over the course of 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 several times stronger military rival that had occupied almost a third of its territory and in the international arena it was fighting for the recognition of its newly established statehood.

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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. The process of accession to NATO actually started already in 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 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 cooperation.

The extensive scrutiny and assistance provided by NATO and its member states within the framework of 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.

Strategic orientation in a changed environment

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 nineties into a noticeable security provider, a full-fledged member of the transatlantic community that frequently shows capacity to 'punch above its

weight' in its contribution to international peacekeeping efforts. This was 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 long-term consolidation of this part of Europe. This goes well along with the track record of high level of alignment of Croatian foreign policy with both the CSDP and NATO's policies in the most challenging fields of contemporary international relations - like relations with 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 (1,4% of GDP). Nonetheless, clear political statements in its fundamental strategic documents (National Security Strategy, Strategic Defence Review), together with 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.

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While it was evident that the country of limited capacities, especially the one that is

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 NATO led peacekeeping missions.

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Contribution to the efforts of the Alliance

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 US and remove last doubts about its NATO accession perspective. Namely, same 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 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan already 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 troops in fifteen years, which significantly contributed to the image of a reliable and interoperable security provider,

offering 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 present day. It is important to mention that the Croatian contingent also consists of representatives of US-Adriatic Charter members (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia).

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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 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 KFOR mission in Kosovo. The first deployment has been made in the 2009, with twenty officers and two transport helicopters. Based on the decision of Croatian Parliament from 2015, the staff number could grow up to thirty five, with the possibility of rotation. Its main tasks are transport of KFOR forces, cargo and VIP persons and the contingent is under direct command of the operation’s commander.

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Having in mind the aforementioned contribution, especially taking into account limited capacities of the country, one can conclude that Croatia has been actively supporting endeavours of NATO in the field of peacekeeping and conflict management.

Obviously, it is difficult to foresee the dynamics of international affairs and position of Croatia in that regard. However, due to persisting relevance of the US-led NATO as the most important military-political alliance, 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 the international recognition at the international arena and many times stronger enemy in strive for regaining territorial integrity has been challenging for the newly established administration in the post-Cold War period.

Only after political changes in early 2000s, both in the country and in the policy framework of the transatlantic community, had Croatia started its real transitional reforms and the accession process to both 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 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 both 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 Block'. 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 possible extent with policies of the transatlantic community, especially in the field of security and defence.

Therefore, in the case of Croatia, the division between 'the Atlancists' and 'the Europeanists' barely ever existed in the national security and defence policy discourse, not to speak about any serious attempts to promote the vague concept of military neutrality in contemporary international affairs.

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