Why Croatia urgently needs a new holistic National Security Strategy

In the midst of the rising security challenges, during which Croatian politicians have to put delicate foreign and security issues on the table at the earliest opportunity. A new comprehensive National Security Strategy for the Republic of Croatia has to be created finally since the only one published in 2002, is indisputably outdated. As a consequence, this paper will focus on Croatia’s current foreign and security perspective based on existing strategic documents and legislation. With that aim, firstly Croatia’s security frameworks will be identified. Then, a list of current and imminent threats will be presented. Croatia’s relations with some of its neighboring countries as well as with some global players will be given as well. Ultimately, the guidelines on how to proceed will be introduced.

Croatia quo vadis?

After it had ensured its territorial integrity by ending the Homeland War in 1995 and had subsequently gained its independence as well as its international recognition and finally had become a full NATO member in 2009 and EU member in 2013, the Republic of Croatia has remained without a clear foreign and security policy direction. In 2002, the Croatian Parliament adopted the first and so far only National Security Strategy (referred to as the 2002 Strategy). According to the document, officially entitled “Strategy for the Republic of Croatia’s National Security”, it represents, in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, a conceptual document in which the Croatian Parliament, as the highest political and legislative body, determines and accepts political views on fundamental national security issues. Not only does the 2002 Strategy define national security as a condition in which fundamental values of society and its institutions are protected, but also stresses how new solutions have to meet new challenges. However, as of today, the country’s foreign and security policy seems to be direction-
deeper Croatian engagement. This lack of interest for the UN is equally identified in the activities of political elites. In fact, political parties in their programs do not mention the role of Croatia in the UN at all.

2. OSCE

The OSCE membership is being neglected, likewise. Croatia became a full-fledged OSCE participant in March 1992. Because of its wartime experience in 90’s, Croatia was often on the OSCE agenda as a receiver of international aid. The organization played a major role monitoring the war crimes proceedings as well as the way internally displaced people were being treated. After 15 years of the OSCE field presence, the Office in Zagreb closed in 2012, after successful completion of its mandate. In recent years, one can notice Croatia’s reduced interest for the organization. In 2014, the country contributed 200,347€ or 0.1% to the Organization’s unified budget and had 7 nationals deployed. In 2015, that amount decreased to 199,770 € and 5 nationals. For now, it looks like Croatia is mainly interested in the election protection offered by the organization. Altogether the OSCE has previously observed ten elections in Croatia, most recently, parliamentary elections in November 2015. Nevertheless, the prospect of this cooperation is getting more and more precarious caused by the mentioned decrease in budget.

3. NATO

As proved in the more recent 2014 Strategy on Participation of Croatia in International Missions and Operations, the importance is now a priori given to NATO and EU membership. Id est, the first concern shifted towards the US and European countries. Thus, it looks as if NATO and EU-led missions are now considered strategic priorities. Croatia’s support to NATO started in 1995 when it engaged in Bosnia and Herzegovina by assisting in IFOR and SFOR missions. Consequently, the cooperation deepened in 2000, when Croatia entered NATO’s Partnership for Peace and ultimately became a full member in April 2009. At the end of 2012, the Croatian Armed Forces (CAF) completed the process of full integration into NATO structures. Since then, the CAF gives significant contribution to NATO Smart Defense and Connected Forces Initiatives. The country has participated in several NATO missions and operations. Most notable examples being the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, support to Kosovo mission and participation in the Operation Unified Protector in Libya. From July 2009 and up until today Croatia is militarily present in Kosovo together with Kosovo Forces (KFOR). As the relationship between the organization and the country continues to deepen, in January 2015 Zagreb took part in the Resolute Support Mission, a newly NATO peace operation in Afghanistan with a total of 105 members of the Armed Forces.

With the outbreak of wars in the Balkans, the European Union firstly objected the dissolution of Yugoslavia, fearing for the overall European security. That is why Croatia was initially primarily focused on deepening its cooperation with NATO. At the end, the United States were the first to perform decisively in the Balkans in the 90’s because at the time it did not have the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). As in present, the so called Western Balkans is seen by many as the region where CFSP/CSDP should be tested and practiced. Interestingly enough, the term Western Balkans itself was introduced at the Zagreb Summit of the EU when Croatia initiated its Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Since then, Croatia sees itself as “the transitional mentor” in the region due to its experience in post-conflict state building. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the new Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Strategic plan for the 2016-2018, directly relates the implementation of the Croatia’s foreign policy within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. With regards to Croatia’s help in EU peacekeeping missions, EUPOL Afghanistan was the first CSDP mission Croatia joined in 2002. At present, Croatia is engaged in several EU missions: EULEX Kosovo, EUPOL Afghanistan, EUMM Georgia, EUPOL COPPS and EU NAVFOR Somalia - Atalanta. So far it had also participated in the two EU Battlegroups. In the first half of 2011, Croatia took part in the Nordic BG led by Sweden as well as in the BG led by Germany in 2012. Positive experiences gathered during these engagements have led to a decision that Croatia takes part in EUBG every three to four years. Accordingly, new Croatian participation is expected in the second half of 2017. Following the recent UK decision to leave the EU and ergo relinquish the Council presidency in the second half of 2017, Croatia has now been added to the

4. The European Union

By finally joining the EU in July 2013, after a decade long application process, Croatia entered into a new stage of foreign policy creation. Not only did it become a subject to the EU CFSP/CSDP, but also a member of the EDA and the EUSC. By becoming a member of the Union for the Mediterranean, Croatia had the early access to the EU Mediterranean Policy, likewise. Croatia fitted on the energy-security plan, as well. Due to the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and with the aim of approaching the establishment of the Energy Community, the EU chose to diversify its energy resources. An important example concerning Croatia in that respect is the construction of the LNG Terminal on Croatian island Krk which became one of the EU’s most important energy projects financed up until today with 4.9 million euros.

The head of the EU delegation in Bosnia, Lars Gunnar Wigemark has recently stated that the EU made a big mistake when it failed to perform decisively in the Balkans in the 90’s because at the time it did not have the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). As in present, the so called Western Balkans is seen by many as the region where CFSP/CSDP should be tested and practiced. Interestingly enough, the term Western Balkans itself was introduced at the Zagreb Summit of the EU when Croatia initiated its Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Since then, Croatia sees itself as “the transitional mentor” in the region due to its experience in post-conflict state building. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the new Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Strategic plan for the 2016-2018, directly relates the implementation of the Croatia’s foreign policy within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. With regards to Croatia’s help in EU peacekeeping missions, EUPOL Afghanistan was the first CSDP mission Croatia joined in 2002. At present, Croatia is engaged in several EU missions: EULEX Kosovo, EUPOL Afghanistan, EUMM Georgia, EUPOL COPPS and EU NAVFOR Somalia - Atalanta. So far it had also participated in the two EU Battlegroups. In the first half of 2011, Croatia took part in the Nordic BG led by Sweden as well as in the BG led by Germany in 2012. Positive experiences gathered during these engagements have led to a decision that Croatia takes part in EUBG every three to four years. Accordingly, new Croatian participation is expected in the second half of 2017. Following the recent UK decision to leave the EU and ergo relinquish the Council presidency in the second half of 2017, Croatia has now been added to the
Current security challenges

With its accession to NATO and the EU, it looks like Croatia has removed the security threats from its agenda. Unfortunately, Croatia has many reasons for concern. According to the recent 2016 Public Report of Croatia’s Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA), even though the security situation in Croatia in the previous periods was stable, today the stability and security of the country is being more and more challenged. The threats highlighted by the report are inter alia the increased expression of Chetnik extremism on the Croatian territory among young population, corruption causing serious economic crimes and the “Balkan smuggling route” on which Croatia has been used as a transit country. Croatian intelligence explicitly warned its citizens against the destabilizing effects of the crises in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Ukraine and the refugee crisis. As the cause of the European refugee crisis, more than 600,000 refugees and migrants passed the country in 2015. Although the migration flow through Croatia passed without major security incidents, it has been confirmed that it served terrorist organizations to bring their supporters into Europe. Terrorist attacks all over Europe, especially in France, Belgium and Bosnia-Herzegovina have increased the risk for terrorism in Croatia. Moreover, Croatia itself has been a target of a terrorist act. The kidnapping and execution of Croatian citizen Tomislav Salopek in Egypt in the summer of 2015 furthermore reminded Croatia of the spillover effect of terrorism.

900 radical Islamists from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Macedonia and Sarajevo region went to Syria and Iraq in order to fight for ISIS and 300 of them have returned back to their home countries. SOA’s Report warns of radical enclaves in the near neighborhood as well. Due to its geographical position and the fact that Croatians are one of BIH’s three constitutive nations, the overall situation in BiH always had a direct effect on Croatian national security. Even newly National Strategy for Development Cooperation (2015-2020) names BIH as of crucial importance. The reappearance of the ultra-strict approach to Islam known as Salafism/Wahhabism in BiH could unfortunately evoke some malicious ghosts of the past. Reportedly, only 20 km away from the Croatian border near the town Velika Kladuša, there are around 40 families living according to Sharia law and carrying the symbols of the Islamic state. Moreover, in that same town, there is a village Gornja Mača reputedly being the main Salafi stronghold for the recruitment in the region. Particularly upsetting is the ISIS propaganda video showing Balkan fighters threatening to spread jihad around South-Eastern Europe.

As stated in the National Strategy for Prevention and Fighting Terrorism (2015), South Eastern Europe is Croatia’s first and foremost region where terrorism should be fought. Furthermore, the 2002 Strategy accurately points out how Croatia cannot achieve an optimal degree of national security without peace and security within its immediate surroundings. Hence, raising radical Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the increasing professionalization of terrorists acting in the region and abroad should be of special concern for Croatian political elites when issuing the new National Security Strategy.

Foreign relations

It is beyond doubt that many diplomatic relations with countries on Croatia’s direct border have been shaken, especially due to the recent European refugee crisis. Still, the 2002 Strategy describes diplomatic relations between Croatia and Slovenia as high-leveled, and Croatia-Hungarian relations as impeccable. The issue of savings of Croatian citizens in the Ljubljana Bank up until today did not affect the close relations of the two countries. Still, the situation changed regarding the delicate border issue in the Piran Bay. Due to the severe breaches in the arbitration process on the Slovenian side, Croatia decided to end an international arbitration agreement in April 2015. Up to the present, a final solution on how to proceed has not been found. The closure of the borders for the refugees on the Balkan route in 2015 furthermore complicated this historically close relationship.
will have to address and clearly redefine foreign relations with some of its immediate and distant neighbors.

What's next?

Croatian political elites have to inform and warn the citizens against rising direct and indirect security threats in the ever challenging world as well as to identify to which security frameworks Croatia is more sympathetic to. The security protection of Croatia within NATO and the European hub is indispensable and therefore it needs to be newly evaluated as well. The UN and the OSCE memberships, numerous regional cooperation forums and bilateral relations are equally important in order to face rising security challenges. Still, the upcoming Croatian leadership has to decide and agree on new foreign and security policy goals. This has to start with an overall re-evaluation of Croatia's direct and imminent domestic as well as international threats. Most importantly, a single document, with a clear timeframe (unlike the 2002 Strategy) has to be created since the current framework of action is misleading and ineffective.

During this evaluation process some other very important decisions have to be made and taken into consideration. When it comes to Croatia's engagement on the ground, the scope of country's capabilities has to be defined at the early stage. At the internal level, the document should provide guidance for the future of military, police and reserve forces. While at the international level, Croatia has to follow the example of many other European countries, by giving the exact deployment numbers for each particular organization, with a clear explanation. Why does Croatia give more soldiers and money to NATO than to the EU, or less to OSCE than to the UN? Is it due to historical, economic or strategic reasons or is it due to country's nonchalance? The definition of the level of Croatia's political ambition is a prerequisite for its security development. The same applies to its foreign policies. What are the concrete results of numerous official visits undertaken by Croatian politicians? In which diplomatic ventures will Croatia actually engage? What did change in terms of close and distant neighbourly relations? As a result of all these considerations, an interdisciplinary expert committee should be established followed by a wide public debate. It would be very much recommendable to use the existing documents and plans which have already been prepared by the numerous institutions as a first input. Furthermore, a close co-operation of these same institutions should be ensured and maintained. A regular periodical review of the document is another element that should be included in a new strategy in order to start timely actions and correct outdated strategic concepts. That is why an establishment of an independent, political body, like the Information Commissioner, aiming to monitor the implementation of the new National Security Strategy, should be set up as well.

Finally, after the adoption in Parliament, the new holistic National Security Strategy has to be presented to the Croatian citizens and implemented as soon as possible.

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Notes

2) Jović, p.13
7) Jović, p.4
9) European Defence Agency, European Union Satellite Centre
10) Dvornik, 2016
14) Čehulić-Vukadinović, L. (2014); p. 3
17) Bešić, J. & Fenduk, M. (2016, February); p.2
20) International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia
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