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Security and Media

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Security Sector Reform and the Media

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Foreword

Issue of relations between media and army, as well as (inner) system the army is governed by, generally called defense ministry, is interesting in general - not only regarding Croatia, its neighbors or the region. Majority of questions regarding defense system, with armed forces being its most important element, are the same, or should be same, for any country, without regard to its location or political system; even independent of its geopolitical surroundings. The only issue is whether the public is allowed to ask those questions, and whether answers to the questions are public enough so that qualified discussion about the subject might ensue in a society. In other words, what are chances of asking questions and possibilities of getting answers; and are possibilities only formal or is there a real will to provide answers? It is this formal or real situation (not taking into account societies where such questions cannot even be put forward) which tells us about the degree of transparency and also, according to modern standards, degree of democratization; especially if we know that defense issues, equipment of armed forces and training of soldiers and officials take up huge amounts of money from state budget that could be spent better for the same purpose or relocated to some other area. In that sense, this story from Croatia might be an inspiration for discussion about the situation in the region, but also a motivation to open, general discussion about this subject.

Introduction

It is not simple to talk about this issue on Croatian example. Croatia is implementing army reform now, but it is difficult to say how much the reform process is transparent, how much and in what ways it is covered in media. There is not a simple answer to the question of media coverage of Croatian army (HV), ministry of defense (MORH) and whether that coverage is sufficient for Croatian public to pass critical judgment on what is happening in army institutions, what lies beneath some decisions, why are some events unfolding as they are. Similarly, it is uncertain to what extent are those institutions open towards media and to what extent do media influence their structure, behavior and decision-making.

In the case of Croatia, there are many reasons which render this issue complex.

First of all, there is historical heritage. After more than thousand years, Croatia is once again an independent country. Taking only 20th century in account, Croatia was, until 1992, part of two large countries: Austro-Hungarian monarchy and Yugoslavia. One can say that only 1945 and socialist Yugoslavia returned some elements of statehood to Croatia which, to certain extent, got involved in deciding about the issues of defense and armed forces. Decision-making

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process in that area became more and more democratic over time, so that the federal parliament turned into an open stage for discussions about federal budget, the large part of which was given to the army. Still, one cannot say that process was transparent, or even close to proclaimed principles of socialist Yugoslavia. Of course, there was public data on the number of soldiers and professional military personnel, even the number of ships planned to be built during the last years of former Yugoslavia. Amounts given to soldiers' wages were also made public, with some information available in specialized military magazines "Front" and "Narodna Armija", as well as other publications published by the Federal Secretary of National Defense.

But still, despite everything, decision-making process was not transparent. Basically, any request was put forward as unquestionable demand to finance something untouchable – defense of the country; any questions raised in public were seen as undesirable. They were treated as dangers to national security; as threats to Yugoslav survival in a world divided into two opposed camps. There were even some absurd examples, like army pensions which were treated as military secret. There were many battles fought during various closed sessions of party bodies or parliamentary committees, but not in public.

One of the reasons for non-transparency was that SSNO (Yugoslav ministry of defense) was formally part of federal government, but commander-in-chief was presidency of FR Yugoslavia. At the end of the 80s discussions became more and more open, with successful opposition to financing military coffers. Military budget was lowered to seven, six, even less per cent so that army wages became lower and late. Same thing happened to army pensions, and there was even some cutting off the heating in military objects due to unpaid bills.

Military excesses, particularly regarding employment policy and finances, were taking place during strong turbulences, as was the case with "Croatian spring" in 1971.

As a result of this non-transparency, citizens learned many army secrets during war at the beginning of the 90s, some of them being disclosed amid general euphoria brought by dismantling of then federal country embodied in Yugoslav National Army. Officials triumphantly showed underground hideouts, buried airfields and numerous military objects which were said to be unnecessarily in the hand of the army instead of being given to civil sector.

During preparations for war and creation of Croatian army, ways of its organization and financing were completely non-transparent. The same happened with organization of Croatian ministry of defense, aiding Croatian Defense Council (HVO) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as employment policy both in MORH and HV as well as HVO.

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At that time, almost all media were under government control so that there wasn't any space for opening these issues, let alone initiating a wide discussion. Every questioning of suspicious arms transactions, usage of military units for non-military purposes, financing of defense, command structure, employment policy, involvement of uniformed persons in crime as well as wars outside Croatia was immediately labeled as treason. Similarly to socialist Yugoslavia, avoiding army service became risky. Requests for civil service due to conscientious objection were blasphemous. At the same time, it remains unclear why part of the population was never called up, even during massive military actions "Lightning" and "Storm", although people with all necessary military knowledge tried to voluntarily join Croatian army. The number of Croatian Serbs that fought in Croatian army remains unknown, along with the fact of how many of them died.

This is very important because of special military service by Croatian Serbs in eastern Podunavlje region. There has been much discussion of it in media, but the problem hasn't been regarded as a whole – ranging from Serbian participation in Croatian army during the war to Serbs from different parts of Croatia serving Croatian army today, along with their chances of promotion. The same relates to other minorities.

Considering the war, opening military issues was very risky because its discussion was treated as bringing state policy, even state itself, in question. As a consequence, numerous journalists, along with some NGOs, were put under surveillance organized by military intelligence. Nobody in military intelligence was ever charged with any crime.

Dealing with the issues of defense and army during the 90s also meant dealing with grey zones: crime (internal – contained within the system of MORH and HV, as well as link between internal crime and other elements – ruling political structures), as well as war crimes.

Investigating the issue of war crimes, especially during the end of the 90s when independent media slowly grew in number, media outlets provided information about organization of not only Croatian army but all armed forces. Media leaked that National Guard (embryo of Croatian army) employed members of Foreign Legion and other foreign mercenaries. Media provided information about tasks of military intelligence and how, often, those who were in charge of upholding the law were the very perpetrators of crime.

Thus was born the story about "parallel institutions of power" which ruled over Croatia via ministry of defense. Alleged head of alternate institutions was Gojko Susak, minister of defense, who was much more easily reported in media as an exponent of hard-line HDZ current than president Tudjman himself. Similar case happened with Ivic Pasalic, Tudjman's advisor for

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foreign policy, although it was well-known that neither of them would have passed important decisions without assent of Croatian president. However, media wanted to preserve charisma of first Croatian president intact, so that some people in Croatia were shocked when the court in Hague proclaimed that president Tudjman was also indicted for war crimes.

Croatia today

Most recent phase was introduced after election results of January 2000, when HDZ was toppled from power. Regarding media, things started to change some time earlier, but on political level radical changes were yet to be introduced. Biggest change was that media could start talking more openly about numerous issues. At the end of 90s many media were out of government control and aided government change with their articles. Croatian Army was so much blackened that it was expected from new government to try and save military dignity with some decisive action.

However, the change clearly showed that transparency of some issues as well as the level of public discussion are always linked with the will of politicians to make them a matter of public observation. Time has shown that the coalition government wasn't completely ready to face Croatian society with the whole problem and open key issues mentioned in the media even during the 90s – like demilitarization of the region, civil service, cost of the army and whether Croatia needs one, as well as costs of entrance into NATO. All other questions in regard to this subject are basically modified versions of the main issues, outlined above. It seems as if the new government has shown too much concern, lack of will and indecisiveness, ignoring numerous scandals which had served to create a climate for government change. Ruling politicians didn't want to get rid of many people who were recognized in media as human rights' abusers, or were involved in crime. Government saw all criticism, like asking for responsibility for certain scandals (rape of conscripts, crime, employment policy), as enemy attack and retaliated with investigations and announcements of court action. One example is explosion in "Duboki jarak" military installation in 1994. Media published documents showing that the leak of two tons of poisonous gasses had been covered up. Although the accident happened during HDZ government, new authorities continued sweeping the case under the carpet, maybe because then chief investigator is now head of army headquarters.

One can say that true transformation began with retirement of seven army generals two years ago. The generals signed an open political letter which criticized the government and its attitude towards war veterans. Executive branch let it pass, but President Stjepan Mesic

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promptly retired dissenting generals thus, according to some remarks, preventing a military coup.

Media didn't succeed in starting public discussion, so one can say that there has been no true discussion of this issue in Croatian society. Media mostly covered individual cases that have turned into scandals due to silence in MORH, with both pre- and post-2000 events alike shrouded in the veil of silence. Also, media used to transmit information gained from politically opposed blocks without criticism or discussion which might have caused the public to exert pressure on the government. Maybe such attitude of the press is due to fact that neither HDZ nor coalition government reacted following numerous articles about situation in Croatian army, about crime and controversial officials. Since numerous scandals left both public and political establishment cold, it is obvious that some media saw they cannot mobilize people by investigating "big" issues, which can cause too emotional reactions among some Croats. That reaction is partly real – an honest reaction of former and present members of Croatian armed forces - and partly manipulation, mostly by formerly ruling politicians who are trying to cover up their unpleasant record of the 90s.

Even now, during election campaign, media don't discuss armed forces and how much financing they need. Media coverage is even below standards set by socialist Yugoslavia during the 80s when media asked about debts, standard of living and price of military upkeep.

During the past month, there have only been several articles about the situation in Croatian army. However, they are mostly reports from the meeting held in Umag recently – a media seminar for journalists covering military issues.

Besides that, there have appeared articles about new crime in MORH regarding falsified diplomas with 50 persons being under investigation. There are also several articles about preparations of Croatian soldiers for peacekeeping operations and articles regarding the issue of conscientious objection.

Altogether is too little for such an important and extensive subject. Besides, except state-owned newspapers "Vjesnik", no-one has covered seminar in-depth, and another state-owned newspapers "Slobodna Dalmacija" published only a small report, followed by an interview with vice prime minister and minister of defense Zeljka Antunovic. However, she made no mention of transformation of armed forces and related cost.

Such attitude of political parties is understandable considering that all polls on that subject, as well as on Croatian entrance into NATO, filed it under "others" category, with primary issues being unemployment, economic recovery, privatization process and its revision,

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crime. Media seem to follow such logic. There have only been several occasions for discussion of military issues.

First of all, it has been during the time of passing of new law dividing authority over armed forces between Croatian president and government (ministry of defense). It was clear that each side had its media supporters, and was not fighting for a certain attitude towards heritage of HDZ government, but for its division. At the same time came announcements of army reform intended to lower the number of standing army and professional soldiers.

Ruling politicians realized that they had to lower huge army costs if they wanted their reforms to succeed. Unfortunately, political discussion was more concerned with the story of firing war veterans. The process was duplicated at the same time in the ministry of internal affairs so that veterans' associations, supported by right-wing parties, emphasized that new coalition wanted to forget recent Croatian past and people who shed blood for independence. Emotional power launched discussion onto front pages.

Only several politicians within the ruling coalition had strength to publicly speak about the necessity of reform because of the needs of Croatian society. Politicians invoked NATO in their defense, pointing out its remarks about inadequate age and educational level of professional soldiers. They said that less numbers also meant higher wages for the remaining soldiers, together with more money for upgrading military technology. Counter-arguments were ignored for the most part. Most radical government critic, weekly newspapers "Feral Tribune", ran an interview with a prominent American sociologist Bogdan Denic who opposed argument that Croatia has to enter NATO. Denic stressed that it was illusion that entrance into NATO aided accession into the EU. He pointed out examples of coup staged by Greek colonels and military overthrow in Turkey to explain that entrance into NATO doesn't in itself mean democratic stability, and pointed out examples of stable democratic countries like Sweden, Switzerland and Austria that are outside Alliance. Despite general acceptance of NATO, no-one has explained realistic possibility, or need, to build new warships and buy planes and other technology at this moment.

Discussion went up a notch at the beginning of 2003 when Croatia passed a new law allowing for sending troops to Afghanistan. Issue of sending soldiers to Iraq caused even more dispute. Today, when the end of war is not in sight and with members of occupying force dying there every day, it is clear that it is too risky to send Croatian youth, who have just stepped out of bloody war in this region, to Iraq. Even some military columnists, known for unconditional

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support of the United States, started to rein in, explaining that we should wait until bombs go silent.

Roundtable on Iraq organized by state-owned newspapers "Vjesnik" was perhaps most quality public discussion about motivation of Croatian foreign policy and its position, as well as security. Although published in newspapers with low circulation, that roundtable, coupled with other critical commentaries in other media and engagement of the public as shown at various protests, certainly had some influence in the eventual decision to delay sending of Croatian troops to Iraq.

Although state top adopted strategic documents as guidelines regarding geopolitical position of Croatia and its defense, they are not fruit of elaborate, argued discussion in Croatian society, but result of decisions made by ruling politicians. Therefore, although all parliamentary parties support entrance into NATO, nobody has yet explained to citizens what it means to enter into organization that is struggling to find reason for its existence in modern world; what is the cost and what is the gain; what Croatia needs to do in order to become a member. NATO primarily sets political conditions, in the sense of democratization of Croatian society.

Therefore it's no great surprise that the public gets more information about reform process from foreign rather than Croatian sources. Few days ago Marvin Harvey, British advisor to Croatian defense minister since 2002, said in an interview that Croatian army has too many soldiers and obsolete technology.

The same weekly newspapers, seven days later, reported about piles of obsolete weaponry - cannons, tanks, armored vehicles, artillery pieces, that Croatia has been trying to get rid of. Those weapons don't have any perspective not only because of their age, but also because their calibers do not conform to NATO standards. Same article also uncovered that Croatian government donated some of the obsolete weaponry to Afghanistan army.

Such transactions are dealt by state-owned company RH Alan, compromised during the 90s as a center of unscrupulous arms smuggling which robbed Croatian citizen. It is significant that one of the people who traded weapons during the war, selling Croatia incomplete Soviet defense system, is today running for parliamentary seat as head of a party with social-democrat name.

Phrase about Croatia being a regional force, launched during Tudjman's era, hasn't been disputed by new authorities.

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Although everyone knows that Croatian army is in poor condition, attempts to point out low standards have resulted in a true maelstrom. Former defense minister Jozo Rados said in an interview that Croatia couldn't defend itself from enemy. He had in mind armies much more modern in organizational and technical sense. Thus he caused wrath from part of the public, and the government ignored the whole event instead of using that chance to come out with the complete truth. Although there were occasional articles warning about technical (dis)ability of Croatian armed forces, public doesn't have the clear image of it. That's why media sometimes glorify "our" MIG-21 against "their" MIG-29, described as "tin can", or talk about modernization of Croatian MIGs in Israel only for the job to be eventually given to Romania. At the same time, public doesn't know how many planes Croatia has (although its neighbors know it all too well) and whether they are ready for combat flights.

Modernization of war planes was more an attempt to create public impression that current government cares about the status of regional force than to make a long-lasting effect. At the same time, Croatia doesn't have enough Canadian water bomber planes to extinguish summer fires.

There has been published new information regarding ongoing army reform. By 20th October 2003, 7240 persons submitted requests to leave armed forces. Besides them, approximately 5000 people partly or completely fails to meet criteria, especially those related to health. Regular checkups have only been established for the last two years. According to health data, as much as 1200 persons are unfit for service. Additional 1200 are on sick leave that has been lasting for months, but their status is not resolved, and one cannot get information on how long they have been sick and why is their status unresolved. 14 M.A. and 10 Ph.D. level employees left MORH, which is another warning signal. All together, there are too many questions for us to be satisfied with the answer that "defense reform is an overwhelming task and also the one which was never implemented before", which is missing the point since Croatia has been independent country for only 11 years.

We must look at ever more numerous requests for civil service due to conscientious objection in that context.

Their number increased from 189 in 1998 to 8,500 in 2002. By November this year it has already increased to 6,700. Although ruling coalition didn't support such trend and was even pressured because of it, the numbers are telling in saying that atmosphere for such requests is much more favorable today than during the 90s when those who requested civil service were

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sometimes even beaten in public. However, regarding business premises, the process is going on too slow. The state is reluctant to give up on something it doesn't need.

In my hometown Split alone there is a street where thousands of square meters of business space remained unused for decades, with no end in sight.

Out of 697 real estates owned by MORH more than 400 is not needed. Instead of turning it over to civil authorities immediately, the future of those premises is still unknown, as is the exact amount of money lost due to their vacancy.

Conclusion

In conclusion one might say that, compared to the 90s, there have been some progress regarding transparency of MORH and HV. However, we would be hard pressed to say their work is completely transparent or at least on the level required by current international situation, situation in Croatian society and challenges of its democratization. In a long-term reform process of indefinite length, there has been restructuring of Croatian army. Many left both MORH and HV. 1st Croatian National Guard, Tudjman's Praetorian guard in green berets, was disbanded. However, real discussion about people who took over main offices in army HQs, who were involved in Bosnian war and who committed at least ethically dubious actions, is not taking place. Discussion about possible demilitarization was silenced after IDS asked for demilitarization of Istra region. Crimes of military intelligence institutions have been left to expire.

Entrance into NATO is not a matter of rational debate – anyone who is against it is labeled as anti-European. There is no discussion about why Croatia needs to have an army and conform it to NATO standards. Proclamation that Croatia, as a UN member, has to contribute to world peace is more for internal use. Case of International Criminal Court might serve as good example of refusing to face the truth. The United States tried to dissuade Croatia from joining the court by canceling 18 million dollars' worth military aid. Croatia resisted, but the citizens were never explained that the aid was intended for purchase of weapons conforming to NATO standards. Who would be arms dealers and who would get money back remained unsaid.

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