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CASE STUDY: THE PROCESS OF NATIONAL SECURITY CONSOLIDATION IN CROATIA – PERSPECTIVES FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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The evolution of the national security assurance system of the republic of Croatia in the context of its integration into European and transatlantic security structures, a distinct stage in the dynamics of the regional security landscape. This study aims to investigate the determining factors of Croatia's accession process to NATO and the European Union from the perspective of their implications on the Croatian national security architecture. The research objectives focus on identifying institutional and procedural mechanisms, analyzing transition periods and public support for the integration process, as well as assessing the challenges and opportunities generated by accession. The investigation's findings highlight that the Croatian model offers valuable lessons regarding the strengthening of national security through European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The conclusions emphasize the importance of a strategic, coherent, and multisectoral approach in the accession process, while also underlining the adaptability of security mechanisms to new geopolitical realities.

Keywords: *national security, European integration, security policies, strategic evolution, geopolitical outlook, case study.*

STUDIU DE CAZ: PROCESUL DE CONSOLIDARE A SECURITĂȚII NAȚIONALE ÎN CROAȚIA – PERSPECTIVE PENTRU REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

Evoluția sistemului de asigurare a securității naționale a Republicii Croația în contextul integrării sale în structurile de securitate europene și transatlantice, etapă distinctă în dinamica peisajului securității regionale. Prezentul studiu are drept scop investigarea factorilor determinanți ai procesului de aderare a Croației la NATO și Uniunea Europeană din perspectiva implicațiilor acestora asupra arhitecturii securității naționale croate. Obiectivele cercetării vizează identificarea mecanismelor instituționale și procedurale, analiza perioadelor de tranziție și a sprijinului public privind procesul de integrare, precum și evaluarea provocărilor și oportunităților generate de aderare. Studiul explorează relevanța experienței croate pentru Republica Moldova în contextul obținerii statutului de stat candidat la aderarea în Uniunea Europeană. Rezultatele investigației scot în evidență faptul că modelul croat oferă lecții valoroase privind consolidarea securității naționale prin integrare europeană și euroatlantică. Concluziile evidențiază importanța unei abordări strategice, coerente și multisectoriale în procesul de aderare, subliniind totodată adaptabilitatea mecanismelor de securitate la noile realități geopolitice.

Cuvite-cheie: *securitate națională, integrare europeană, politici de securitate, evoluție strategică, prospectivă geopolitică, studiu de caz*.

Introduction

The expansion of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance in Western and South-Eastern Europe in the period 2000-2013 represented a distinct stage in the evolution of the European and transatlantic security landscape. The geographical positioning of the states of the former Yugoslav communist camp gave them a certain role in the regional security dynamics by building a new security architecture that represented EU and NATO membership [1, p. 1]. Out of the need to be actively involved in concentrating stability efforts in Western Europe, the Balkans and the Black Sea basin, as well as in order to reduce the interference induced by the war in the former Yugoslav area, in the actions to eradicate the Eastern European routes of drug trafficking and organized crime, the EU and NATO have also strengthened their security policies through dedicated programs such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Membership Action Plan (MAP) [1, p. 2].

The 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, characterized by the fall of communist regimes and the adoption of democratic systems, also affected the Yugoslav federation, leading to ethnic conflicts and wars of independence between the 6 republics - Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia. Against the backdrop of the Communists' loss of power to separatist parties in the 1990s [2, p. 31], from 1991 onwards, each republic declared its independence, a process that had repercussions on the constituent ethnic communities [2, p. 32]. The inte-ethnic incidents led to destructive and protracted military aggression, which deeply affected regional security. Thus, the Western Balkans, with its ethnically drawn borders, stood out as a region of heightened insecurity, and for the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Community, this issue became a major concern [1, p. 2].

Methodology applied

The study uses specific methods to investigate the evolution of the process of ensuring Croatia's national security in the post-war period, one of which is the historical method covering the period from 2000 to 2013, which allowed to analyze the stages of development of the Croatian state security architecture and the factors that influenced the adopted strategies. The content analysis method was also applied to examine official documents, literature in the field of strategic studies, international relations and political science. This approach facilitated the understanding and interpretation of the mechanisms behind the political decisions and integration of Croatia into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Another essential methodological tool is the comparative method, which makes it possible to highlight the particularities of the Croatian model in relation to other countries in the region that have gone through similar processes of transformation and European integration. The descriptive method was also used to analyze the institutional processes and mechanisms that contributed to the strengthening of national security. Through this method, the key elements of Croatia's domestic and foreign policies were studied, with a focus on the reforms adopted in the context of NATO and EU accession.

In order to outline possible scenarios of applicability of the Croatian model in the context of the Republic of Moldova, the prospective method was used, which allowed the formulation of courses of action based on the Croatian experience, adapted to the current geopolitical and socio-economic realities in the Eastern European space. Throughout the research process, the principle of objectivity was respected, which ensured the formulation of conclusions, excluding ideological influences or subjective approaches.

Research results

The Republic of Croatia is a member of NATO and the EU characterized by an arduous path to full membership in both structures [3, p. 8]. It is found in several geopolitical and geo-strategic regions, and belongs to Central Europe, South-Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean region and the Western Balkans. According to the researcher Robert Mikas, the majority of Croatian citizens do not accept this membership, because historically, culturally and politically Croatia tends towards the West, but the West places it on the periphery of this civilization [4, p. 359].

On June 25, 1991, the Republic of Croatia declared its independence, with Germany being the first country to recognize this status in December 1991. On January 15, 1992, Croatia was officially recognized by the European Community, and on May 22, 1992, Croatia became a member of the United Nations[3, p. 19]. With the end of the War of Independence in 1995, gaining membership in the Euro-Atlantic structure was one of Croatia's foreign policy goals. The year 1996 was the country's first attempt to apply to NATO's Partnership for Peace, but after the post-war period it did not meet all the necessary conditions [5, p. 182]. The acute problems Croatia was facing had interferences in all spheres of activity, mainly emphasized underdeveloped democracy, shortcomings in the respect for human rights, war-affected economy, territories still under Serbian occupation, complicated relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, border disputes with Slovenia etc [7, p. 392]. After considerable efforts, including with the help of the international community, in 1998 Croatia succeeded in peacefully integrating the eastern parts of its territories, creating the preconditions for a new dialog within the Euro-Atlantic structures [3, p. 23].

The institutionalization of Croatian-North Atlantic relations can be traced through the accounts of career

diplomat Pjer Šimunović, who was directly involved in Croatia's NATO accession process as national coordinator, chairman of the Inter-Agency Working Group, chairman of the Membership Action Plan, deputy foreign minister responsible for international organizations and security, director for defence policy and state secretary of defence in 2004-2011. According to the official, one of the vehicles of Croatian accession to NATO was the Membership Action Plan (MAP), introduced by the Alliance in 1999, which established a more structured framework of relations and responsibilities for future allies [5, p. 179].

After a new application in 2000 [5, p. 182], Croatia joined the program called Partnership for Peace (PfP) [6, chap. III]. The aim of the program is to assist potential members in the security and defense planning system, published in strategic documents, such as the National Security Strategy, Defense Strategy, Military Strategy, etc. In addition, the state defense system requires transparent financing from the country's budget, with systematic democratic oversight of the military forces. Partnership. In addition, the state defense system needs to be transparently financed from the country's budget, with systematic democratic oversight of military forces. The partnership also requires that military forces be trained and prepared for various missions under the leadership of the UN and OSCE, as well as to participate in crisis management operations outside the territories of NATO member countries. Therefore, PfP membership plays an important role in the process of accession of new member countries to NATO, and Croatia has marked it as one of the main elements of the country's national security [7, p. 393].

At the same time, the political changes in 2000, with the victory in the parliamentary elections of the center-left coalition led by the Social Democratic Party of Croatia and the victory in the presidential elections of Stjepan Mesić, signaled the end of the post-war period and the transition to a new stage of the country's development. After the year 2000, Croatia fully engaged in the development of its foreign policy with NATO and European Union membership as central objectives [5, p. 182]. At the same time, the issue of Serb refugees was a priority of domestic policy, along with economic measures and closer cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) [7, p. 392]. Croatia's determination has enabled it to develop its national security and foreign policy and to contribute to international and regional stability.

In the framework of the PfP, Croatia submitted its first Annual National Program (ANP) for 2002/2003, in which it confirmed its commitment to the value system of NATO countries and re-emphasized its membership in the alliance as one of the highest priorities of its foreign policy [7, p. 393]. The second NPA was presented in 2003 for the period 2003/2004 whose aim was regional cooperation, thus getting a positive response from NATO, unresolved remained the issue of borders with Slovenia, reform of the armed forces, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The case of Lieutenant General Ante Gotovina, the main Croatian war crimes indictee, was to become a major obstacle not only in Croatia-NATO relations, but also in Croatia-EU relations [7, p. 393].

With the third NAP for 2004/2005 and the fourth NAP for 2005/2006, Croatia explicitly emphasized that the state had made its NATO and EU membership a key priority, adopting the most important strategic plans [7, p. 394]. The Croatian state has contributed to the improvement of the situation in the region, one contribution being its active participation in the NATO program for Serbia and Montenegro, which included activities such as language training and courses for UN military observers, while simultaneously intensifying relations between the defense ministries of the countries involved. At the regional level, Croatia has contributed to the strengthening of border control in order to effectively combat terrorism, trafficking in human beings and drugs etc [3, p. 24]. Croatia has emphasized its efforts to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in resolving a single outstanding issue concerning Ante Gotovina. As a result, two months after the submission of the last NAP, Lieutenant General Gotovina was detained outside Croatian territory in the Canary Islands and brought to justice [7, p. 394].

In the following years Croatia continued to modernize and invest in its military system as well as to persevere in its domestic and foreign policies, which is why in 2006, at a NATO summit in Riga, the Alliance expressed its readiness to invite candidate countries to the next summit in Bucharest [8], to be held in 2008 [5, p. 183]. Despite the ambitious reforms, a relative lack of public support for NATO membership has been brought to the forefront as a worrying factor by the Alliance, considered as the biggest weakness of Croa-

tia’s candidacy. Domestic opponents of membership cited Croatia’s involvement in international conflicts against its will. However, after an attack on the Croatian embassy in the city Belgrade after Kosovo’s declaration of independence from Serbia in February 2008, public support rose to over 60%. After the Bucharest Summit in 2008, around 60% of the population supported the country’s membership aspirations, according to the Summit Report [1, p. 7].

It is important to mention a few key aspects in Croatia’s path to joining the North Atlantic Alliance from a geopolitical perspective and considering the nature of the candidate state, Croatia. Firstly, following the war of independence, there was internal political support from the political elites to obtain membership status, despite certain minor divergences in programs or visions. Generally, both the ruling parties and the main opposition parties, such as the Social Democratic Party (SDP), supported NATO accession with the rationale of strengthening the state’s security at the regional level. A condition set by the SDP was the holding of a republican referendum on this subject; however, this initiative was later abandoned [1, p. 7].

According to diplomat Pjer Šimunović, who provides an insider perspective on the entire process, a determining factor in the accession process was the lack of significant influence from the Russian Federation on Croatia’s and Albania’s NATO accession – these countries were examined collectively. The expert explains that these two countries were not part of the geopolitical conflicts of the Cold War; therefore, they did not represent a major strategic interest for Russia. Moreover, their desire to join NATO was not motivated by a particular need for protection against Russia, even though Russia opposed NATO’s expansion. Ultimately, Russia did not focus its resources on blocking Croatia’s and Albania’s accession, suggesting that it did not consider this expansion a critical threat to its interests.

In contrast, Russia’s reaction toward the end of the accession process escalated the crisis in Georgia in 2008 into an armed conflict. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the signing of accession protocols with Albania and Croatia, framing this action as part of a general opposition to NATO expansion, regardless of the targeted region. Russia viewed NATO expansion as a threat to its security, contrary to the principle that a state’s security should not be built at the expense of others [5, p. 180].

From a geopolitical perspective on Croatia’s accession to NATO, the diplomat suggests that this process cannot be analyzed on a continental scale but rather on a regional and sub-regional level, in the context of instability and the wars of the 1990s in the Balkans. For this reason, Croatia began developing official relations with NATO later than other post-communist countries, only in 2000. Therefore, Croatia’s and Albania’s accession should be examined in terms of its effects on the Balkan region. During the accession process, it was argued that these countries could contribute to stabilizing Southeast Europe but would need to effectively contribute to regional security by demonstrating their intention to live in peace with all their neighbors.

Thus, due to the strategic importance of the Balkans for NATO, the region was subject to special monitoring, and Croatia had to meet strict requirements to be admitted. The Alliance made a firm commitment to the security and stability of Southeast Europe, including deep political and military involvement in the region, marked by the presence of NATO troops. Consequently, the collapse of Yugoslavia transformed NATO, forcing it to adopt a new crisis management and peacekeeping role, which directly influenced the conditions imposed on Croatia for accession to maintain regional stability [5, p. 181].

These requirements led to the ratification of Croatia’s Accession Protocol in the national parliaments of allied countries. On April 1, 2009, Croatia submitted its ratification document, officially becoming a NATO member. Croatia’s first appearance as a full member of the Alliance was at the NATO summit in Strasbourg and Kehl, held on April 3-4, 2009 [5, p. 183]. Subsequently, Croatia has participated in various military, political, and other operations under the Treaty’s umbrella, fulfilling its international obligations to stabilize critical areas, developing the capacity of its armed forces, enhancing their interoperability, and sharing previously acquired knowledge.

Among the military operations are NATO’s Peace Support Operations in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and contributions to Southeast Europe’s support. Croatia has also actively participated in UN Resolution 1325 on „Women, Peace, and Security,” where NATO pays special attention to the role of women in peace missions and operations [7, p. 395].

Having experienced a prolonged war for independence, Croatia viewed NATO as a guarantee of national security, which propelled its accession to the European Union (EU), representing the state's aspiration to enhance its economic development. These aspirations imposed both rigid requirements and numerous reforms from the EU and NATO concerning democracy, the military, human rights, etc., which Croatia met over time. Being a small country with relatively limited military potential, Croatia demonstrated its ability to contribute to various NATO missions and operations, especially those related to the Western Balkans – a region characterized by instability due to ethnic conflicts and various asymmetric threats.

Croatia has proven it can act as a mediator between countries aspiring to achieve the same objectives in their foreign policy, contributing to regional security in the Balkan countries [1, p. 7-8].

From the perspective of achieving stability and economic recovery, peace, reconciliation, and social resilience after a prolonged military conflict, Croatia submitted its application for European Union (EU) membership in 2003. Negotiations began in 2005 and concluded around 2011 [5, p. 183]. During the same period that Croatia was internally preparing to engage with NATO structures, it also took steps toward EU integration. In 1998, Croatia established the Office for European Integration, responsible for coordinating domestic policies related to European integration and promoting various initiatives toward EU accession. The Office played a significant role in developing the European Integration Action Plan in 1999, which set the framework for developing relations with the EU through negotiations on the Stabilization and Association Agreement, signed in 2001 [9, p. 81].

Compared to other Central and Eastern European countries, Croatia's path to EU membership was longer, marked by internal issues in the areas of justice, anti-corruption efforts, the rule of law, human rights, and freedom of expression – institutions that required reforms in areas such as domestic affairs, agriculture, environment etc. Firstly, from 1990 to 1999, Croatia's president was Franjo Tuđman, who was re-elected in several electoral rounds. During his decade in power, Croatia's rapprochement with the EU was modest [11, p. 6]. After Tuđman's death in December 1999, the government ceased to consider itself a self-sufficient „regional power." Tuđman's party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), underwent significant transformation, shifting from an almost authoritarian party to a pro-European, center-right, and democratically oriented formation, becoming a key supporter of Croatia's accession to both the EU and NATO [1, p. 7]. This change in identity allowed HDZ to support Croatia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures without encountering significant resistance within the party [11, p. 14].

Secondly, Croatia recognized that it could no longer survive as an isolated sovereign state. Thus, it acknowledged the importance of commercial integration with other European states as its main foreign policy objective: to join the EU as soon as possible in 2003 [11, p. 15].

The post-war Croatian Republic, even after moving away from what was considered an authoritarian regime, had to make significant efforts to meet NATO and EU standards. Despite adopting a democratic system after the fall of the communist regime, the country still faced certain interferences with the rule of law. These efforts led to the adoption of the National Program for the Integration of the Republic of Croatia into the European Union in 2003 [11, p. 22]. This was followed by the EU's positive opinion regarding Croatia's accession application, obtaining candidate country status in 2004, and the start of accession negotiations in 2005 [11, p. 23].

The study „Assessing the negotiation experience: quick accession or good representation?" [12], authored by researcher Tomislav Maršić, examines Croatia's negotiation experience through a comparative method based on the models of Estonia, Slovenia, and Hungary. According to the author, the Croatian government adopted and implemented a series of strategic documents aimed at complying with the Copenhagen Criteria, developing domestic and foreign policy areas, and informing society through a Communication Strategy on the benefits of accession. The government created national structures responsible for negotiations, including a president and head of the national delegation, as well as negotiation teams.

Moreover, the author argues that Croatia's negotiation structure was optimized to match the ambition of concluding negotiations in a very short time. The structure focused unidimensionally on executive expertise, which weakened Croatia's representation and internal legitimacy issues.

The pressure to implement reforms quickly stemmed from the change in government in 2000, which fo-

cused on EU accession alongside Romania and Bulgaria, to the detriment of the quality of reforms. As a result, the pressure did not adapt well to new strategic developments, such as EU enlargement fatigue, which produced „euro-fatigue” in Croatia. Consequently, this marked the negotiation process as prolonged and arduous.

Additionally, the author notes the insufficient involvement of the Croatian Parliament in the negotiation teams, which led to a political crisis caused by two major opposition parties, which later influenced public opinion. As a result, the author recommends treating EU integration not only as a foreign policy objective but as part of domestic policies aimed at implementing authentic reforms and involving Parliament and the academic community more broadly in the negotiations. As other countries' experiences in the accession process suggest, European integration is fundamentally a domestic issue since decisions made in Brussels may override those made in Zagreb.

Two major issues prolonged the negotiation period. The first was related to Lieutenant General Ante Gotovina, and the second concerned the veto applied by Croatia's neighbor, Slovenia, an EU member state [9, p. 83]. Slovenia was in a dispute with Croatia over the maritime border in the Gulf of Piran in the Adriatic Sea. The issue was eventually resolved through an agreement and a Slovenian referendum, where 51.5% of voters supported resolving the conflict. Together, these developments allowed the Accession Treaty between the European Union and Croatia to be signed on December 9, 2011, after six years of negotiations followed by an additional two years during which Croatia had to continue reforms in key areas.

The European Commission's opinion reflected the need to meet political criteria, strengthen the rule of law, improve public administration and the judicial system, and combat corruption. The Commission also concluded that Croatia could withstand competitive pressures within the EU market, as it was considered to have a functioning economy. Consequently, on July 1, 2013, after the Accession Treaty [13] was ratified by all EU member states, Croatia became the 28th EU member. This event marked a green light for other candidate countries, both in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, to pursue EU integration aspirations [9, p. 84].

Croatia's accession process to EU standards and its negotiation process were arduous and lengthy, but the actual integration can be considered one of the most comprehensive. The EU applied stricter standards for Croatia compared to other member states and implemented more meticulous political criteria than those applied to Slovenia, Croatia's neighbor in the Balkan Peninsula [10]. Nevertheless, despite the rigorous evaluation process and the lack of support from other EU member states, the Croatian people's will to join the EU remained relatively high until the European Commission declared in 2011 that Croatia had met all accession criteria and was finally accepted as an official member in 2013.

Conclusions

Croatia viewed the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) as an essential shield for defending the state against dangers and threats specific to its geostrategic area. After achieving independence, Croatia sought a strategic partner to help strengthen a security architecture capable of ensuring long-term stability and safety. Thus, Croatia set as a fundamental goal of its foreign policy the accession to NATO and the European Union, considering that these structures would not only guarantee national security but also facilitate economic development by integrating into a regional security system and modernizing national institutions.

Croatia went through a five-year war for its independence and, in the post-conflict period, realized that aligning with NATO was a guarantee for security and economic development. The Croatian government had to undergo a complex process of redefining national and foreign policy objectives while running an extensive information and communication campaign to gain popular support for joining NATO and the EU. Additionally, Russia's neutral position towards the Balkans allowed Croatia to join Euro-Atlantic structures without facing major reprisals, as in the cases of Georgia or Ukraine.

Croatia understood that its economic prosperity and the safety of its citizens could be guaranteed by integrating into a community based on a common and interconnected market. The aspiration to join the EU became more decisive after internal political changes after 2000, when the Croatian government redefined its policies within a new European framework. The integration process also involved a series of reforms and communication efforts aimed at overcoming societal fears about losing national identity through integration into a common community space. These concerns were natural, given that Croatia, formed from the

disintegration of a federation, had consolidated its national identity through a long-lasting military conflict.

The Republic of Moldova could adopt Croatia's model, considered one of the most complex integration models characterized by profound transformations in both the political class and society as a whole. Croatia offers a clear perspective on the quality of internal reforms, and the concept of European integration should not be seen only as a foreign policy objective but also as a catalyst for modernizing institutions, implementing economic reforms, and strengthening the rule of law.

Moreover, Moldova should adopt measures to ensure that the integration process will strengthen national unity, enhance the well-being of the population by providing access to resources, opportunities, and European standards. Moldova must recognize the importance of a coherent public communication strategy regarding the benefits of EU integration and NATO partnership. Additionally, it must adopt a smart diplomatic approach to navigate the challenges imposed by Russia's influence while maintaining a clear pro-European and pro-reform path.

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