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**PREPARING FOR PEACE:  
CROATIA RETHINKS NATIONAL DEFENSE, 2000 – 2003**

**SYNOPSIS**

In 2000, Croatia’s newly elected reformist government weighed how best to increase civilian oversight of a powerful and entrenched defense establishment. Since the end of a long and bloody war for independence five years earlier, political and military leaders had made little progress in adapting to the realities of peacetime. Franjo Tuđman, the country’s first president, had exercised strong personal control over the military, awarding favored officers high ranks and political offices. Both the Ministry of National Defense and the armed forces were far larger than their new roles required, and their lack of accountability to elected civilian leaders was out of step with modern standards. The ministry operated largely in secret and did little strategic planning. But President Stjepan Mesić, Prime Minister Ivica Račan, and Minister of National Defense Jozo Radoš saw an opportunity for change after Tuđman’s death in 1999. The three knew that significant reforms were necessary to make the defense sector more effective, to diminish its political role, and to secure Croatia’s path toward membership in NATO and the European Union. They also recognized the difficulties inherent in (1) establishing a new culture of transparency and democratic civilian control, (2) slashing the size of the military, and (3) drafting laws that would revamp defense institutions. Despite opposition from the military as well as from veterans and politicians who had benefited from the Tuđman-era political system, the reformers succeeded in creating a less politicized, smaller defense sector led by civilians; and by 2003, the country was on its way toward NATO membership.

*Tristan Dreisbach drafted this case based on interviews conducted in Zagreb, Croatia, in December 2015. Case published April 2016.*

**INTRODUCTION**

“I never went inside the Ministry of National Defense,” Jozo Radoš recalled of his eight years as a member of the domestic policy and national security committee of Croatia’s parliament. “It was impossible.”

The defense building in downtown Zagreb, Croatia’s capital, was off-limits to most civilians—even those tasked with overseeing the decisions made within its walls. The closed doors spoke

volumes about the role of the military in a war-torn country in which defense and security were vital concerns. During Radoš’s time on the security committee, Croatia had built its own military force and won its independence in a bloody conflict that began in 1991, when the Yugoslav Federation splintered. In four years of fighting, more than 6,000 Croatian soldiers and 4,000 civilians died, and the violence displaced hundreds of thousands from their homes.

After the fighting ended in 1995, active-duty soldiers numbered more than 100,000 in a country of fewer than 5 million people. More than 2% of the population was in the military—a much larger proportion than in similar-size non-NATO European countries such as Slovakia, in which less than 0.9% of the population was on active duty, or Ireland, in which less than 0.4% of the population was on active duty. Two-thirds of Croatian soldiers were conscripts drafted into nine-month terms of military service.<sup>1</sup> The armed forces remained on a wartime footing during the 10-year presidency of Franjo Tuđman, a former Yugoslav general whose nationalist government politicized the military.

In December 1999, Tuđman died at the age of 77, just as new parliamentary elections were about to take place. Rising voter dissatisfaction with Croatia's struggling economy helped an opposition coalition led by the Social Democratic Party win a majority in the legislature in January 2000 polls. Under the constitution, the president nominated a leader of the parliamentary majority as prime minister and head of government, subject to the legislature's approval. The speaker of parliament, the acting president, formally proposed Social Democratic Party leader Ivica Račan for the role. Račan quickly named a cabinet and assumed his new position in late January 2000.

The presidential vote, held shortly afterward, installed coalition member Stjepan Mesić, a member of the Croatian People's Party, in the post. Mesić was a well-known political figure who had served as Croatia's first prime minister in 1990. He had been a member of Tuđman's Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party when the country declared independence but broke from the party over Croatia's involvement in the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict.

Račan and Mesić were determined to reform Croatia's government institutions while building new relationships with the outside world. In taking on the defense establishment, they had a key ally in Radoš, the new defense minister. Chief on their list of priorities was to strengthen the civilian role in defense policy, planning, and oversight.

## THE CHALLENGE

In 2000, Croatia was a postconflict, postsocialist state desperate for international assistance to help revive its struggling economy. But foreign governments were wary of aiding a country governed by officials whom they considered corrupt and tainted by war crimes that had been committed by all sides during the Yugoslav breakup.

The liberal coalition saw cooperation with the rest of Europe and with the United States as key to building a more prosperous and secure future. "My goal was to bring Croatia into both the European Union and NATO," the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Mesić said. "Being part of them was our destiny."

However, the defense ministry fell far short of NATO standards, which called for civilians to oversee defense spending and lead the development of defense policy and strategy documents. Policy development and planning occurred primarily in the general staff—the group of officers and enlisted military personnel responsible for military administration, operations, and logistics. The general staff was not under the authority of the defense ministry, and the chief of general staff, the top-ranking military officer, reported directly to the president. The ministry's primary duty was to provide administrative support for the military, although it still wielded influence in Croatian society as a result of its control over defense spending and the minister's political connections. "The defense ministry was the preeminent part of the state," and the defense minister was considered the second-most-influential politician in the country because of his relationship with the president and his strength in the HDZ, even though it had little role in planning, said Igor Tabak, a defense analyst and journalist with Obris.org, a Croatian defense-related website.

When Račan, Mesić, and Radoš began to plan a reform strategy in January 2000, they confronted several serious challenges. First and foremost, the new leaders sought to create a central role for

civilians in defense policy and to reduce partisanship and distrust within a military that had been closely tied to the HDZ party and the Tuđman regime. The left-leaning coalition also wanted to increase transparency in the defense ministry so that civilian leaders in government and parliament could better exercise their oversight responsibilities; more transparency would also decrease opportunities for corruption. Finally, the leaders (1) had to downsize the military and defense ministry to save money and (2) had to remove personnel who were not useful in peacetime. To do those things, Račan, Mesić, and Radoš had to confront officers and officials who had profited financially and politically from their military and government service and who likely would push back.

Račan, Mesić, and Radoš would have to alter staffing patterns and internal organization to make the ministry an effective instrument for civilian-led defense policy making. Active-duty officers held most of the jobs in the ministry. Many officers had joined the army during the war and had no formal military training. Although they may have excelled on the battlefield, their skills typically failed to fit the needs of a peacetime ministry, wherein leading soldiers in the field was less important than effective management of defense institutions.

NATO required member states to produce publicly available long-term military plans, but Croatian defense institutions had been built for the immediate needs of war. “The defense system that Croatia had formed for the war was ill-suited for peace,” said Tabak. “It was a system well versed in planning operations and carrying them out, but it was very weak when it came to longer-term planning.”

Previous efforts to develop Croatia’s defense-planning capability had stalled. After the war, Croatian officials had worked with Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), a unit of New York-based L-3 Communications, to develop an agenda for defense reform. The relationship enabled Croatia’s defense ministry officials and military officers to learn from Western defense

professionals, which otherwise would not have been possible because of the international isolation of the Tuđman regime. MPRI helped the defense ministry demobilize wartime soldiers and begin to develop defense policy documents. Although that cooperation ended when Tuđman died in late 1999, some of the Croatians who had participated in the program moved on to important defense policy positions. Vlatko Cvrtila, a University of Zagreb professor who had been with MPRI in the 1990s as an adviser appointed by the Croatian defense ministry, later became a defense adviser to the president.

Professionalization and trust building were also important reform objectives. The military services and the defense ministry were highly politicized, and Tuđman and his political party controlled important aspects of military decision making and operations. Under the constitution, the president could issue presidential decrees with the full force of law anytime he decided that regular government bodies were not working properly. Tuđman used that power to personally direct the development and operations of the armed forces.<sup>2</sup> He exercised further control over the government and parliament through his personal dominance of the ruling HDZ party.

Tuđman had funneled much of the country’s military expertise into a National Security Council within his office, thereby strengthening his role in planning and decision making. Tuđman’s political party also had a presence throughout the armed forces, and Tuđman used those affiliates, organized into political directorates, to monitor soldiers’ political activity. “They had representatives at every level of command,” said

Ozren Žunec served in the wartime army before studying and teaching military sociology at the University of Zagreb. Officers could also hold political posts, a practice out of step with the standards of NATO countries, where separation between active-duty officers and party politics was a key tenet.

“At first glance, it was a very militaristic type of civil-military relations,” Tabak said. “You had

military rankings for a lot of normally civilian state positions. People in uniform were members of parliament and prominent in politics.” Officers could wear their uniforms to party functions, which reinforced the image of a military closely intertwined with party politics. “In truth, this close connection to the military just made it easy for all members of the ruling party to partake in the image of the defenders of the homeland.”

Still, the officer corps was not monolithic. Many officers, some of whom had attained high rank based on experience and their performance during the war, had no ties to the HDZ party. Because they received none of the special benefits allotted to their HDZ party-affiliated comrades, those officers served as a potential base of support for reformers.

A third challenge was to increase transparency—especially in the area of procurement, a sensitive problem for the new government. In the early 1990s, the United Nations had forbidden member states to sell arms to Croatia. As a result, Croatian military and government officials had to procure weapons and equipment through criminal networks—a covert policy that inflated costs and created opportunities for corruption that enriched members of the ruling party but that was hidden from those outside the defense sector. “Huge resources went through the armed forces or the defense ministry without proper explanation,” Žunec said. “It was not transparent, and nobody knew what kind of money was going where.”

Civilians in parliament or civil society had no access to information on expenditures and policy decisions made by the defense ministry. “It was very weak in actually giving evidence of how the money was spent,” Tabak said. “The military was absolutely out of the control of parliament,” Radoš stressed.

Parliament’s weakness in exercising oversight affected accountability in other domains as well. When parliament had to act on defense issues, it did so out of the public eye. “What I found most curious was that during the war there was a custom

of passing legislation related to the defense sector and not publishing it anywhere,” Tabak said. And a dearth of independent media outlets contributed to the problem, Tabak said. “We would find out about shifts in our general staff in *Janež*,” a UK-based magazine devoted to military issues.

Finally, the armed forces that Račan and Mesić inherited in 2000 also presented a practical problem that would make their entire agenda more difficult to achieve: A large portion of the state budget was tied up in a military that was far too large for the country’s peacetime needs. Military spending had peaked at more than 11% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1994 and was at 5.2% of GDP in 1999. The percentage was much larger than NATO members spent on their militaries. The Czech Republic, for example, spent 1.9% of GDP on defense in 1999.<sup>3</sup>

After the war, the Tuđman government reduced the size of the armed forces significantly, but in 1999 the total number of active-duty personnel remained at more than 60,000, and the cost was high.<sup>4</sup> “They were spending more than 80% of the military budget on personnel,” Žunec said. “This was totally crazy.” More resources had to be allocated to upgrade equipment, train soldiers, and build military facilities.

Economic conditions complicated the task of cutting the number of military personnel, including both officers and enlisted soldiers. Unemployment was greater than 21% in January 2000, and mass discharges of soldiers would only worsen the problem of joblessness.<sup>5</sup> In addition, dismissing thousands of soldiers would create significant political difficulties for the reformers. “Our veterans are very loud and influential,” Tabak said. “They have real political power, and they are strongly connected to the HDZ party.”

In early 2000, Račan, Mesić, and Radoš began to assemble their battle plan.

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

The liberal coalition that Račan and Mesić led already had a draft road map that helped them identify the problems in the defense sector and

then helped them design potential solutions. In late 1998, Croatian general Anton Tus and Žunec, the former officer who had become a sociology professor, began work on a book titled *Croatian Army 2000*. Tus was a respected military leader who had played an important role in the war but was not aligned with Tuđman's nationalists. Žunec shared Tus's belief that the military had to be smaller, more transparent, and less partisan.

The project had a political bent: expecting Račan's coalition to win the 2000 election, Žunec wanted to provide the new government with a guide to Croatia's knotty defense issues. "We went to the president of the Social Democratic Party, Račan, and asked him whether he'd be interested in a study on the defense sector in Croatia," Žunec said. "He didn't know anything"—not even the most basic details of how the defense system worked.

The three lead authors gathered a group of 12 people, including officers and defense scholars, to work on the book. "They were in the defense establishment but had been sidelined because of their disagreements with the former president, their Yugoslav past, or their non-right-wing views," Tabak said. Most of the drafters had been trained at the Faculty of Defense Studies in Zagreb, which operated during the Yugoslav years until it closed in 1994. Žunec said the group could function independently of the party.

Rather than working to produce an exact blueprint for action, Žunec said, the authors aimed to propose and examine goals for policy makers. The book called for downsizing the military, increasing transparency in defense ministry and military budgeting and procurement, removing the military from party politics, reducing presidential powers over the armed forces, cutting the defense budget to match the means of the state, and orienting the country toward NATO.

The ideas in the book fit those of the general reform agenda of Račan's left-leaning coalition. Although Račan's Social Democratic Party published just a small number of copies in 1999, the book became the basis of discussions around

reform. Some of the drafters of the book would reiterate those ideas in the early 2000s as part of an official party document entitled "Croatia in the 21st Century," said Siniša Tatalović, a University of Zagreb political science professor who helped write both documents.

The new government also could look to the experiences of other states in central and eastern Europe that had undergone transformations to democratic control of their armed forces. "Other European countries—Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic—had experiences of transformation," said Radoš. "It was very clear what to do, which meant putting the military under democratic control, organizing the defense ministry in accordance with basic democratic rules, and cleaning the ministry of all the bad things that had happened from 1995 to 2000."

Radoš viewed civilian leadership and transparency as key to reforming the defense ministry. He had studied for three years at a technical military academy in Zagreb. Although he did not complete the program, the knowledge he acquired helped bolster his credibility as defense minister and helped him understand military ways. "The minister of defense shouldn't be a *military official* but should be a *politician*," he said. "It was clear that the defense ministry and military should be open to the public and the media."

The reform effort required constitutional support. In December 1999, just before the election, the liberal parties signed an agreement to limit the powers of the presidency and strengthen the role of parliament. After the coalition secured a two-thirds majority in parliament and Mesić won the presidency, the new president convened a working group to draft proposed constitutional amendments, and the parliament created its own working group for the same purpose. Each presented its proposals to a parliamentary committee, which turned them into a formal draft. The parliament quickly approved the amendments, which went into effect in November 2000.<sup>6</sup>

The amendments sought to remove some of the ambiguities and overlapping responsibilities

contained in the 1990 constitution. Under the new provisions, the government held executive powers but was more accountable to the parliament. The president remained commander in chief of the armed forces and had powers of appointment in both the military and intelligence sectors<sup>7</sup> but had no authority over defense spending or force development and could not order troops into combat except in times of war, which only parliament could declare.

Separate legislation was required to refine the role of the defense ministry and the defense minister in the chain of command and in defense policy making.

Radoš knew that developing a defense reform agenda also would require close cooperation with NATO, which had limited its cooperation with Croatia prior to 2000 because of concerns about the country's political system and the Tuđman regime's resistance to outside involvement in Croatian affairs.<sup>8</sup> To join the alliance, Croatia had to see to it that its reforms were compatible with NATO standards. The NATO accession process would include regular meetings between representatives of the alliance and officials in the ministry, officials in the military, and other members of government.

## GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Radoš, Račan, and Mesić had a long list of measures to implement when they began to reform Croatia's defense establishment in 2000. The new leaders intended those measures to assert civilian control and oversight over defense policies and planning. The chief tasks were to establish a new culture of civilian leadership, get military leaders out of party politics, develop new legislation that would institutionalize civilian control, downsize the armed forces, and build a working relationship with NATO.

### *Learning an early lesson*

The presence of Radoš, a civilian politician, at the head of the defense ministry sent a powerful message that change was coming. For much of the

1990s, defense ministers had been generals. Radoš had to work with officers skeptical that he was qualified for his position and had to begin establishing a new culture of civilian control in the ministry.

"I came to the defense ministry without military experience, without being a Croatian defender" (a term for describing those who fought in the war), he said. "I was a member of parliament during the war, and I was very young. I don't think generals understood how I could be the main person leading the defense ministry, including military policy."

Radoš, who was 43 years old at the time, had served on the parliament's domestic policy and national security committee from 1992 to 2000 and had been frustrated by the lack of access to relevant information about defense policy and procurement. When he became minister of defense, he wanted the ministry to establish a new relationship with the parliament so that civilian legislators would have greater access to information about the defense ministry.

Shortly after becoming minister, Radoš signaled his new way of doing business by inviting the members of the parliamentary committee to meet with him in the defense ministry building, which had been off-limits to most civilians during the Tuđman years. At the meeting, Radoš discussed the government's reform agenda and the problems that confronted the ministry.

Radoš said the meeting taught him an important lesson in the many facets of transparency. "Some members of parliament misused that meeting and immediately revealed to the public all the information I gave them," he said. Because the information he shared had shed light on challenges the ministry faced, some politicians were eager to leak it to the media. Radoš concluded that the process of change had to involve a "learning period" during which officials and lawmakers would develop a new understanding about the ways they would interact.

Radoš also sought to share more information with the public. In the early months of his term,

he made regular public announcements of his ministry's reform goals.

### *Pulling politics out of defense*

Establishing democratic civilian control over defense institutions required personnel changes among officers and officials who had been closely affiliated to the Tuđman regime. In his position as defense minister, Radoš faced pressure from supporters of the Račan government who wanted to see dramatic changes in a ministry that many considered a place of corruption and privilege, but he worried that an aggressive attempt to cleanse the defense ministry of Tuđman loyalists could hurt the overall transition process.

Radoš decided to try to diminish conflict by taking a gradual approach. Shortly after taking over as minister, he publicly stated that he would not make “hasty” moves that could force out ministry staff who had contributed to the creation and defense of the country.<sup>9</sup>

Although Radoš would not purge HDZ supporters from all levels of the defense ministry, he moved quickly to replace Tuđman loyalists at the highest levels in the ministry, including six of the eight assistant ministers he had inherited. Those six military officers were “very close to the HDZ and President Tuđman,” Radoš said. “New assistant ministers were nominated who were civilians.” Radoš said both Prime Minister Račan and many Croatian citizens supported the housecleaning because independent media outlets had accused ministry officials of corruption—especially in weapons procurement—during the previous administration.

To find new assistant ministers, Radoš turned to graduates of the Faculty of Defense Studies—the same program that, although it had ceased operations in 1994, had educated the authors of *Croatian Army 2000*. Radoš announced the replacements in February and publicly stated that the ministry should be a predominantly civilian institution.<sup>10</sup>

Radoš had to decide how deep into the organization his personnel changes should go. One

option was to root out all officials throughout the ministry who had strong ties to the HDZ, but a deep purge would create the impression that the new government was trying to replace the politicization of the Tuđman government with a politicization of its own. “The new government should not take revenge,” he said. “If you take revenge once, there will be more revenge” in the future.

Instead, Radoš chose to replace only six of the eight assistant ministers just below him. All other staff would have a chance to remain at the ministry as long as the new deputies were satisfied with the work of all other staff. “I wanted to give a chance to people who were on the third level of the administration,” he said. “I asked my assistants, ‘Are these people doing good work or not?’” Radoš said he trusted his assistants to evaluate the performance of lower-level ministry staff and determine whom to retain.

Radoš also announced in early 2000 a government policy stipulating that military officers could no longer hold positions in political parties, run for office, or appear in uniform at political functions. If they wanted to hold civilian posts, they had to leave the military. Until 2002, there was no legislation to formally mandate that policy.

### *Ousting dissident generals*

During the first year, HDZ-affiliated officers who had enjoyed privileged positions under Tuđman began to resist the leadership of the Račan government and President Mesić. “The former most influential group in defense started to take issue with its personal decline in power,” Tabak said.

In September 2000, prior to the November enactment of the constitutional amendments, 12 generals—7 on active duty and 5 retired—wrote an open letter to the government attacking new defense policies. The letter was especially critical of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal of the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), a judicial body based in The Hague that investigated and prosecuted war crimes allegations related to

the conflicts of the 1990s. Prior to the letter's publication, the Račan government decided to hold trials for war crimes suspects and allowed investigators from the Hague tribunal to look for the graves of ethnic Serbs in Gospić, a town in central Croatia.<sup>11</sup> The letter accused Mesić and the Račan government of presenting the war "as a crime and something filthy, whereas in fact it was the foundation of Croatia's freedom, independence, and sovereignty."<sup>12</sup>

Mesić responded quickly by ordering the seven active-duty generals into retirement. "My message to those who think they can bring down the government with pamphlets is that they are playing the wrong hand," a media report quoted the president as saying. "Whoever wants to be involved in politics has the right to do so. I won't suggest which party they should join. But while they are in the army, they will not be publishing pamphlets."<sup>13</sup> Some of the generals soon went into politics as members of the HDZ or other right-leaning parties.

Radoš said he agreed with Mesić's decision to send a message that officers should stay out of political matters, but he also said the president had failed to consult with him before taking action. "It was a decision by President Mesić without any consultation with anybody," said Radoš, who was out of the country at the time.

Mesić said the situation demanded decisive action. "That is something that needed to be dealt with immediately," he said. "What you have to do in the army is command. If I had waited for three days to make a decision, every barracks and army settlement would have a table set up where soldiers could sign a letter of support to the generals. These were decorated and famous generals. The only thing left for me if I had waited three days was to resign and bring crisis to the country."

### *Working with NATO*

The new government's efforts to build ties with NATO were important for two reasons. First, the cooperation provided political cover for policy makers seeking to implement defense reforms and

increase civilian control over defense institutions. Croatians strongly supported NATO accession as a means of developing closer ties to western Europe and ensuring national security in a volatile region. Difficult measures such as military downsizing became more politically palatable when Radoš and other officials cited NATO obligations.

Second, Radoš said, NATO's goals were in line with the coalition's defense reform agenda, and meetings with NATO experts provided clarity and expertise on how those reforms could be implemented effectively. "They knew better than we did" how to carry them out, and the cooperation "was absolutely positive and welcome to me and the defense ministry," he said.

When Radoš became defense minister in January 2000, Croatia had a poor history of cooperation with NATO. Tudman's government had made halting efforts to open discussions toward accession, but the alliance members were wary of Croatia's shortcomings in democratic governance. Following Radoš's public commitments to create a smaller, civilian-dominated defense ministry and a smaller military, Croatia enjoyed increased contact with NATO and its member states, including a visit from the US Navy's Sixth Fleet, a major NATO unit, and a public declaration of support from the United States for Croatia's bid to begin the NATO accession process.

Radoš met with defense ministers from other NATO states, and NATO representatives met with Croatian officials at various levels of government to discuss the defense and security reforms that would be required for accession. Technical experts arrived from abroad to help the country develop the capabilities of the defense ministry and the military. There were presidential and prime minister-level meetings. Representatives of various NATO organizations met with the Croatian defense ministry, general staff, and armed forces.

Cvrtić, an adviser to the Croatian president at the time, said high-level NATO officials attended meetings several times a year to discuss annual goals for defense reforms. He said NATO's

participation was crucial in getting Croatia to take on small and manageable commitments that moved toward meeting NATO requirements rather than attempting a sweeping overhaul.

NATO encouraged more-systematic and transparent defense planning, and Croatia developed greater capabilities of benefit to the alliance, including in the areas of military police, landmine removal, and medical units.<sup>14</sup>

In May 2000, Croatia joined the Partnership for Peace, a NATO program intended to increase trust between NATO members, other states in Europe, and countries of the former Soviet Union. Membership had served as a first step toward accession for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, all of which joined the alliance in 1999. The partnership also provided Croatia with opportunities for military cooperation.

NATO invited Radoš to its ministerial meetings in Brussels, and in 2001, Croatia established a team at NATO headquarters, led by Tus, the retired general who was a coauthor of *Croatian Army 2000*.<sup>15</sup> Croatian soldiers, officers, and defense ministry officials gained direct experience with NATO practices through frequent contact with military personnel and civilian defense specialists from member states.<sup>16</sup>

In May 2002, Croatia joined the Membership Action Plan, which created a clear set of goals the country had to achieve to be eligible for NATO accession. The Membership Action Plan carried a set of standard expectations all candidate states had to meet and required those states to make annual reports on their progress. The criteria included settling international disputes by peaceful means, demonstrating a commitment to the rule of law and human rights, settling ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, and establishing democratic and civilian control over the armed forces.<sup>17</sup>

### *Drafting defense reform legislation*

Meeting NATO standards for civilian control over defense institutions required new laws, and securing such enabling legislation to reform the

defense sector took more than two years. The defense ministry worked with civilian advisers to prepare drafts. And as its workload increased, the parliament's domestic policy and national security committee created a subcommittee devoted solely to defense issues.

The legislative process aimed to produce two main laws regarding the military: the Defense Law and the Law on Service in the Armed Forces. "We prepared these laws for two and a half years," Radoš said. "Half a year of thinking of what to do, one year of preparation and discussion, and after that, one year in parliament." The Defense Law contained most of the reforms, including reorganization of defense institutions and the chain of command. The Law on Service in the Armed Forces set the rules and benefits of military service and stated that soldiers and officers could not join political parties, run for political office, or participate in political rallies or demonstrations. The ministry organized roundtable discussions of the legislation, involving members of the domestic policy and national security committee. Mesić said he was consulted throughout the drafting process.

NATO member countries assisted in the drafting. The United States offered technical guidelines for defense reform, and the United Kingdom provided legislative experts, according to Tatalović, who had been one of the authors of the *Croatian Army 2000* book and who had served on the drafting team.

The ruling coalition could pass defense reform legislation without HDZ support, thanks to the coalition's two-thirds majority in parliament. However, the six parties in the governing bloc had to agree on a number of issues. Radoš said the drafting process was not particularly contentious, but that the resulting legislation gave his defense ministry less power than he had desired.

One question lawmakers had to tackle was the relationship between the ministry and the general staff, which consisted of the officers and enlisted personnel responsible for the military's administrative, logistical, and operational needs. In

2000, Radoš proposed placing the general staff under the authority of the defense ministry, thereby putting it under civilian control and reducing the autonomy of the armed services. But Martin Špegelj, who had served as minister of defense and chief of general staff during the war, argued that subordinating the general staff to the ministry would politicize the armed forces, according to the newspaper of a right-leaning political party.<sup>18</sup>

The final draft achieved Radoš's goal of subordinating the general staff under the minister of defense, and the law also placed the minister of defense in the chain of command between the president and the chief of general staff. However, in such areas as military promotions, the minister needed approval by the president. The decision to remove or replace the chief of general staff required the cooperation of three different institutions: the minister could propose changing the chief, but the parliament had to review the move; and the president had to carry it out.<sup>19</sup> The president also had a role in approving defense policy documents produced by the defense ministry.

Because of worries about placing too much defense authority in either the prime minister's government or the presidency, the legislation included the president, the government, and the parliament in decisions about deploying military forces. The parliament could declare a state of war, but it would require approval by the president to go into effect. The president could submit a proposal for declaring a state of war to the parliament, but such a proposal would require the countersignature of the prime minister. The parliament decided when to send troops abroad—for instance, to participate in peace operations.

The Defense Law increased the role and authority of the defense ministry, giving it responsibility for creating defense policy and performing tasks related to the day-to-day operations of the military. The legislation required the ministry to produce a strategic defense review and a long-term development plan for the armed

forces. There had been no precedent in Croatia for those defense policy documents, drafted under civilian leadership. Under the Defense Law, the parliament gained a greater role in defense oversight. The legislature had purview over the defense budget.

The law also provided for a reworked National Security Council that would meet to give advice on defense documents and evaluate defense reform. The council comprised the president; the prime minister; the ministers of defense, foreign affairs, interior, and justice; the president's national security adviser; the chief of general staff; the director of the security and intelligence agency; the director of the military security and intelligence agency; and the head of the Office of the National Security Council. Parliament passed the legislation in April 2002.

Importantly, the text of the laws was available to the public, which had not been the case with defense legislation in the Tuđman era. "It was published and available in the official gazette," Tabak said. "You could actually go and read it."

### *Downsizing and streamlining*

Soon after the coalition government took office, Radoš outlined plans to reduce the size of the military and the defense ministry in order to move toward NATO standards and to free public funds for other purposes. In February 2000, he announced a plan to reduce the number of professional soldiers and reorganize military units—a process he said would be completed by the end of the government's term in December 2003.<sup>20</sup> Two weeks later, he set initial goals for downsizing, including a reduction in the number of professional soldiers by at least one-quarter and a reduction in the number of conscripts in the military. (In 2000, the defense ministry employed 33,145 military personnel and 9,768 civilian personnel. Military personnel included about 21,000 male conscripts whom the military had drafted for nine months of service.)<sup>21</sup>

Although Radoš publicly said the cutbacks would take place by the end of 2003, he

established no clear guidelines regarding who would have to leave the military and who would stay.<sup>22</sup>

Radoš took an initial step toward downsizing in March 2000. At that time, about 4,000 soldiers, or about 1 of every 8, were on extended sick leave, and he believed many were abusing the leave policy. He told the soldiers to return to work or retire. By 2002, about 3,000 full-time personnel had left the military for that reason.<sup>23</sup> Radoš also oversaw measures that moved the armed forces away from a wartime structure, including reducing the number of brigades.

Radoš wanted to abolish conscription. After studying the issue during his first year in office, he decided “it was stupid and against our interest,” he said. “These conscripts hampered the functioning of a very big professional army.” Mesić resisted the proposal, Radoš said, but in early 2000, Radoš announced (1) a cut in the number of conscripts the military would take in and, (2) for future conscripts, a reduction in the length of service to six months from nine.<sup>24</sup>

The defense ministry was overstaffed with civilian employees. In 2000, the ministry was employing more than 10,000 workers—far more than needed for a country the size of Croatia. In January 2001, Radoš announced that the ministry had cut more than 1,200 employees during the first year of his mandate. In early 2002, he said the number of military and civilian personnel, which still numbered about 40,000, would shrink to around 25,000 by the end of 2003.<sup>25</sup>

In June 2002, Radoš resigned as defense minister in a cabinet shuffle, as the ruling coalition weakened and his own party began to fall apart. He said he felt he had lost the political support he needed to do the job.

Radoš’s successor was Željka Antunović, who had served as a deputy prime minister working primarily on social issues and who was a deputy president in Prime Minister Račan’s party. The first woman to hold the office of defense minister in Croatia, Antunović quickly addressed the challenges of slashing the size of the military.

In working to meet the 2003 downsizing goals, Antunović had to be aware of political considerations. By setting objective criteria such as age, health, and demonstrated ability, she drew a sharp line between those who would leave and those who could stay. For example, officers who had failed to win promotions at a normal rate would be likely candidates for release.

Antunović said cutbacks should begin at the top because the senior ranks provided a model for the rest of the military. But accomplishing the cutbacks was far from easy because officers who were at least 65 years old and had 40 years of experience had been eligible for full pensions, but many had remained in their jobs. Antunović’s criteria forced about a hundred senior officers to retire. “That did not make me very popular among the people who retired, who were very influential,” she recalled. “They tried to make problems. They brought lawsuits against the ministry.” Ultimately, however, they left.

“The first hundred people who left the army during my mandate were people with the highest ranks: generals and colonels,” she said. “This was a powerful message that . . . reform is not going to start at the level of the ordinary soldier, but it’s going to be all the way through—and starting from the top.”

Removing officers from the top meant shaking up the defense establishment. “She started to remove some older people from the system,” said Cvrtić, the professor. Some officials whom Antunović forced out found jobs as advisers to President Mesić. Among them was Petar Stipetić, the chief of general staff, who became Mesić’s top defense adviser. Cvrtić said Antunović’s personnel changes led to an influx of younger officers who had trained in the United States, Germany, or other NATO member states.

Antunović was aware that financial compensation was crucial for outgoing soldiers. She had told Račan that she would take that position only on the condition she would have the financial resources to fund thousands of severance packages and pensions. “Of course it cost a lot of

money, but the assumption going into that reform was that any reform that saves money in the future has to cost a lot of money up front,” Antunović said.

Antunović instituted a onetime offer meant to quickly cut the size of the military. Under her policy, any soldier with at least 20 years’ work experience, including work outside the military (because the Croatian military had been created less than 20 years earlier), would be eligible for a full pension. If a soldier in that category found new work, the soldier would be eligible to retain a partial pension to supplement the new income. “They could retire, but since it was a lot of younger people, they were allowed—if they got a different job—to still get part of their pensions along with their pay,” she said. The policy, unusual in Croatia, encouraged soldiers to move on to new careers. “We are talking mostly about veterans. You had to have special relations with them because they were in the war.”

The defense ministry offered three categories of severance and retirement packages. The majority of outgoing personnel in 2002 and 2003 received an average gross severance of around US\$12,100. A smaller number of personnel, which included those who had qualified for full retirement, received an average gross severance of around US\$1,550, in addition to their retirement benefits. The third and smallest category, who were not eligible for any pension benefits, received average gross severance of around US\$12,470. The defense ministry’s total severance expenditure in 2002 and 2003 amounted to around US\$77 million.

The defense ministry was unable to provide data on pension expenditures, but as of 2010, the average monthly pension benefits for an army soldier who had served in the independence war were equivalent to about US\$820. For a soldier who had not served in the independence war, the average pension was around US\$490 per month.<sup>26</sup>

“Downsizing also included programs to take care of those who were leaving,” Antunović said.

She oversaw an initiative called Project Spectra, which provided training for former soldiers. The centerpiece of the program was a three-day workshop that taught participants how to create a résumé, apply for a job, and perform in an interview, along with advice on general life and work habits.

Most soldiers embraced the opportunity to leave early with financial compensation and training opportunities, Antunović said: “They were not forced out. That is a big part of the answer to the question about how it was politically possible.”

“They were allowed to retire,” said Tatalović. “They were given a period to adapt to civilian life. They could stay at home and go to school while still getting a part of their pay. Most of the people who left the armed forces were able to integrate into civilian life without much protest.”

One problem in the rapid downsizing process was that the military lost some skilled personnel. The deputy minister of defense had the authority to make exceptions to keep skilled individuals but had no time to review every outgoing soldier. Soldiers with marketable skills took advantage of the opportunity to leave the military early and find employment in the civilian sector. “They took the opportunity to get the severance package, which was quite generous,” Antunović said. “And they were able to find other jobs because they had great expertise and knowledge.”

“Setting up clear and understandable criteria that make sense and establishing a good support system . . . for people who had to leave were the key components for reform,” Antunović said. “The criteria were equal for all—and not only on paper.”

Antunović’s plan resulted in the most significant reduction in defense ministry and military staffing of any period from 1998 to 2014, according to defense ministry data. In 2002, 3,230 military personnel and 456 civilian personnel left their jobs. In 2003, 6,658 military personnel and 695 civilians left. By the end of 2003, Radoš and Antunović’s combined efforts saw a reduction in

military personnel to 21,557 in 2003 from 33,145 in 2000. The number of civilian personnel dropped to 8,256 in 2003 from 9,768 in 2000.

Culling civilian personnel from the ministry staff was easier than removing soldiers, Antunović said. She was able to move active-duty officers out of the ministry and into military posts, and unneeded civil servants could find work in other ministries. “People in the ministry were public servants, so the criteria weren’t applied to them. . . . Most of them went to regular pensions, or we moved them to other ministries.” The downsizing also reduced the number of active-duty military personnel in the ministry, because some decided to retire and then join the ministry as civilians.

The personnel cutbacks gave Antunović the financial flexibility to increase the pay of those who remained in the military. “Their pay had not changed for seven years,” she said. “One of my goals was that through reductions in the number of people, some funds would be freed up and used for pay raises for those who remained. . . . That was one of the factors that led people within the system to gain confidence in me. It allowed reforms to move on without excessive friction within the system.”

Antunović also credited the success of the downsizing effort to the government’s willingness to spend money on incentivizing soldiers to leave and to provide training programs that would help them transition to civilian life. “You cannot run a reform so that you only take away from people—especially in an army a few years after a war,” she said. “You cannot just take, take, take.”

In 2003, Antunović put out tenders for a small group of young civil servants to start work in the ministry and provide a new pool of civilian talent. She hired around 40 people for entry-level positions.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Although cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was a necessity for securing NATO and EU membership, the government’s arrest and

prosecution of war crimes suspects and cooperation with the ICTY became the biggest threats to the Račan government’s political survival and the implementation of its defense reform agenda.

In September 2000, one day after Mesić forced seven dissident generals into retirement for signing a public letter that criticized the government’s prosecution of war crimes, the HDZ party released a public statement calling on Croats to rise up against what the party described as the “anti-Croatian Communist regime.” The statement accused the Račan government of trying to lead Croatia “back into a Balkan association, in which it would soon lose its independence” and claimed the government was fomenting a potential civil war. The party demanded that Mesić immediately call early elections. Mesić rejected the idea. The statement sparked unsubstantiated rumors of a coup attempt.<sup>27</sup>

“The mix of international pressure and internal expectations made for a very explosive atmosphere in Croatian society,” Cvrtić said. Račan, Mesić, and Radoš had to withstand large public demonstrations against their leadership.

In February 2001, the conflict over war crimes prosecutions intensified after police issued an arrest warrant for Mirko Norac, a well-known former general and one of the 12 signers of the September 2000 letter. The charges against Norac were related to the killing of 40 ethnic Serb civilians during fighting in the Gospić region in 1991.

News of the warrant led to a protest rally attended by more than 100,000 people on the main square in Split, a port city on the Adriatic Sea. HDZ party members called for overthrowing the government, and one of the speakers at the rally was Ivo Sanader, the HDZ’s new leader. Also at the rally were many representatives of veterans groups, which the HDZ had cultivated during the Tuđman years to support party interests. One media report quoted Mirko Čondić, a retired officer who led a war veterans association, as

saying, “Norac will not be tried in court for defending his country while we are alive.”

“The veterans were really a stone around [the Račan government’s] neck,” Tabak said, because their political pressure made it difficult for the governing coalition to build a reelection campaign around encouraging economic indicators, such as a return to positive GDP growth rates after a period of declining GDP near the end of the previous HDZ government.

Radoš said the issue of cooperation with The Hague “was very complicated and the most difficult thing I did” as defense minister. “It was far more complicated and difficult than the proposal of new laws and reforms of the defense ministry,” adding that he believed other countries’ positions toward war crimes allegations among Croatian officers were unjust. “What they wanted from Croatia was very humiliating. We had to open all our military documents to them,” Radoš said. “It was very difficult to explain to the public that Croatia is in such an international position that it had to [work with the ICTY], although it is not just. These are very emotional things. It is not easy to explain to people who lost their hands and legs in a war.”

Despite his misgivings, Radoš said he recognized that cooperation with the tribunal was necessary for achieving the government’s goal of integration with the European Union (EU), NATO, and other multilateral organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Mesić strongly supported the process. “We needed the tribunal in The Hague because our country and our legal system were not able to prosecute our own war crimes, and crimes happened on all sides,” he said. “We needed to have legal action against certain people, and we mostly did that. The more distinguished the people from the wartime period—if it was a matter of prosecuting them—then The Hague tribunal stepped in.” Because a 1996 law provided for cooperation with the ICTY, “we were honoring our own laws by going to The Hague.” (Mesić later

underscored his support for the tribunal by traveling to The Hague to testify at the trial of former Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, which began in 2002.)

Despite the inflammatory rhetoric about and the close media attention to the antigovernment protests, much of the public supported the government’s reform agenda and the need to cooperate with the tribunal, Cvrtila said. “President Mesić and the minister of defense had support from the majority of people in the defense system, and the public was on the side of these institutions,” he said.

To handle cooperation with the tribunal, the government created a council comprising the deputy prime minister and the ministers of defense, foreign affairs, justice, and interior. The role of the defense ministry was especially challenging because inspectors from the tribunal questioned active members of the military, including the chief of general staff and the army inspector general. The government and the tribunal argued at times about access to documents.

In the end, the HDZ lacked sufficient numbers in parliament to obstruct the legislative process of reforming the defense sector. But outside parliament, the party continued to use the government’s defense reforms and cooperation with The Hague as tools to build political resistance to the Račan government.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

From 2000 to 2003, the Račan government and President Mesić launched reforms that transformed Croatia’s defense institutions and put the country on course toward NATO accession. Active-duty military personnel were no longer allowed to participate in politics, civilians controlled the defense ministry and managed long-term strategy, and the army had shrunk significantly in both size and influence.

Active-duty soldiers no longer held political offices or publicly supported political parties after 2000. Soldiers with political ambitions had to leave

the military if they wished to run for office, and several of the generals Mesić forced into retirement in 2000 gained seats in parliament in 2003. However, Mesić remained popular, and voters reelected him in 2005. “Today the Croatian army is not part of any political struggles,” Mesić declared in 2015.

The defense ministry turned into a civilian-led institution, became less politicized, and began producing policy and strategy documents that set long-term goals and were available to the public. The ministry completed a strategic defense review in 2005. “The change to transparency was quite important,” Tabak said. “It allowed, from 2005 onward, a person like me to actually start working on domestic defense issues in public. . . . I could get hold of public documents describing the actual state of the Croatian military.”

In November 2003, amid infighting among members of Račan’s coalition and based on a public perception that the government had failed to deliver on all the reforms it had promised in the 2000 campaign, Croatian voters returned the HDZ coalition to power in the parliament, and Sanader became prime minister a month later. Although the change in government raised questions about the future of reforms, the new prime minister was mindful of his party’s international image, and he accepted that Croatia’s future depended on stronger ties to the EU and NATO.

Reflecting the changes throughout the country, the HDZ had changed significantly since the death of Tuđman in late 1999. “Sanader was a different type of leader,” Antunović said. “It was very important to him how he was going to be perceived in NATO and the international community.”

Cvrtila agreed that Sanader had worked closely on the reform process with Mesić, who was elected in 2005 to a second five-year term as president. “Sanader and President Mesić made a very strong and wide coalition for achieving the goals” of NATO and EU membership, he said. Cvrtila was Mesić’s defense adviser from 2005 to 2008 and said Mesić encouraged him to work

closely with Sanader’s defense minister on defense reforms.

The HDZ’s strong nationalist credentials provided the coalition with the political cover needed to continue on the path toward NATO accession and cooperation with The Hague after 2003. But turning back the Račan government’s reforms would not have been easy even if the HDZ had wished to. “Croatia was already well under way to NATO accession,” said Sandro Knezović, a researcher at the Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb. “There was no way back.” The liberal coalition had amended the constitution, passed defense reform laws, and removed thousands of soldiers from the military. Backing out of the NATO accession process would have jeopardized the country’s growing economic and political connections with western Europe.

During the Račan government, the defense ministry cut the number of its military and civilian personnel to just below 30,000 in 2003 from almost 43,000 in 2000. By 2003, Croatia’s defense spending had dropped to 2.1% of GDP, putting it in line with the GDPs of NATO member states.<sup>28</sup>

In 2009, Croatia achieved full NATO membership. The country became an active participant in international military missions and deployed troops to the NATO mission in Afghanistan; to UN missions, including that in the Golan Heights region of the Levant; and to EU missions. At one point, the country was active in 17 different international military missions, Tabak said.

In 2013, Croatia fulfilled the Račan government’s second major foreign policy goal by joining the EU. The moves toward NATO and EU memberships led to the lifting of international embargoes. “This allowed Croatia to enter the normal market for credit and defense equipment,” Tabak said. “The country was not forced to completely rely on smuggling. It was not forced to have the top of the government consort with criminals to get weaponry for war.”

There were no accounts of widespread

corruption in the defense ministry after 2000. Timothy Edmunds, a University of Bristol professor, wrote that corruption had benefited mainly elites in the Tuđman era and that after 2000, personnel changes at the top levels of the defense ministry and the military—along with measures toward greater transparency and financial control—eliminated much of the problem.<sup>29</sup> Berislav Rončević, minister of defense from 2003 to 2008, received a four-year prison sentence related to the acquisition of army trucks in 2004, but the Croatian Supreme Court acquitted him in 2013. Sanader, prime minister from 2003 to 2009, spent four years in detention on corruption charges not related to defense, and as of 2016, he was free, awaiting a new trial.<sup>30</sup>

## REFLECTIONS

Croatia's successful efforts in the early 2000s to increase civilian control over defense institutions and to depoliticize the military illustrated the importance of supportive influences from outside a country's borders. The country's process toward NATO accession played a crucial role by fostering a new mind-set among both policy makers and the citizenry. Although some reforms were hard to explain to the public, the widely accepted goal of NATO membership bolstered political support for difficult measures that otherwise could have fallen victim to powerful interest groups within the country's culture and government.

Croatian leaders maintained that NATO membership gave the country an image of safety that was beneficial for tourism and for obtaining foreign investment. In addition, the collective-security provision in the NATO charter reduced Croatia's need to maintain a large military force for defense of its national interests.

By 2009, when the country joined NATO, a new professional and apolitical culture had taken root in the security and military sectors. The drive to join the Western military alliance had created a "new security and military culture," said Vlatko Cvrtila, who had served as President Stjepan

Mesić's defense adviser from 2005 to 2008. "We wanted to build our military structure, culture, and mentality based on the experiences of other NATO member countries." The alliance provided a model of transparency, nonpartisanship, and civilian control in defense institutions.

The promise of membership in NATO and other multilateral organizations helped Croatia's political leaders sustain defense reform support among the public and within the military. "When we did not have enough arguments to persuade those people for change, we said it was because of NATO membership," Cvrtila said. "It was not so popular to be against NATO membership—especially if you were a member of the defense sector. . . . It was a promoter and vehicle of defense reform."

Once the path to NATO membership had become clear, the defense reform process gained momentum. "The reforms are like throwing a rock in the water," said Siniša Tatalović, a University of Zagreb political science professor who helped draft the initial reform agenda and later became an adviser to President Mesić. "The ripples expand, and they don't stop until the process is over. . . . The rock is not going to jump back out of the water." The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party, which had been highly critical of the Ivica Račan government, continued the reforms, and Croatia joined NATO under an HDZ government.

The NATO accession process kept Croatian policy makers on track to continue the defense reform process by setting conditions for joining the alliance. Those conditions helped build political will behind difficult policy choices. "Two-thirds of the reforms that took place in this country would never have taken place if there had been no conditionality," said Sandro Knezović, a researcher at the Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. "Carrot-and-stick mechanisms were really important for us."

Because the country benefited from the principle of collective defense in Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which stated that an attack on one

ally would be treated as an attack on all allies, NATO membership enabled Croatia to field a smaller, more modern military than it would have had in the 2000s. “We have the umbrella of NATO; we don’t have to be afraid that someone is going to attack us,” Mesić said. Therefore, instead of maintaining a large force to fight a territorial war, Croatia developed armed forces with specialized strengths valuable to NATO.

NATO membership also had a positive *economic* impact—especially for a country like Croatia that wished to build a robust tourist sector. “The NATO security umbrella is of utmost importance for the overall stability of society, which is important for the development of service industries and the overall business climate,” Knezović said.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Croatia aspired to be part of the West, and NATO membership was an important step toward that goal. A defense reform process constituted one of NATO’s key criteria and, later, a criterion for EU membership; and it also represented an important element in the long-term process of adopting the values of the transatlantic community, Knezović said. Croatians felt a “sense of ‘we-ness’ toward this Western community,” he said. They felt “detachment from the East, detachment from Belgrade, detachment from everything that had been related to Moscow. . . . Belonging to the West was very important for the redefinition of Croatia’s national being in the postsocialist period.”

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