

Relations between the United States and Croatia: Development and Future Perspectives¹

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1. Introduction

The relations between the Republic of Croatia and the U.S. in the post-Cold War era cannot be separated from the general U.S. activity in the area of Southeast Europe,³ particularly in the Western Balkans.⁴

After the Cold War, we can distinguish three periods in the foreign policy of the U.S. towards the Western Balkans. First, a period of extraordinary activism during the Clinton Administration (1994–2000), followed by the gradual departure from the region during the administration of George W. Bush (2000–2008). The third started after a period of not giving particular importance to the region. This new era represented the re-strengthening of U.S. action in the area during the second presidential mandate of Barack Obama (2014–2016). In general, U.S. policy towards

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³ The terms ‘Southeast Europe’, the ‘Western Balkans’, and ‘the region’, although not synonyms, are used interchangeably throughout this article to depict Croatia’s neighbourhood.

⁴ The Western Balkans consists of: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo (European Commission 2018).

the Balkans since the end of the Cold War altered from containment to strategic reengagement. One of the primary objectives of the American *grand strategy* after the end of WWII was to limit the influence of the USSR. At the end of the Cold War, this goal has been altered: supporting democracy globally, and preventing the Russian Federation or the People's Republic of China from turning into a new Euro–Asian hegemon.

In the context of U.S. grand strategy, the area of Southeast Europe (the Western Balkans) is significant because it geographically links Europe with the Middle East and it opens the way for the spread of Western influence to the Caucasus and Central Asia. The effort to spread U.S. influence in these areas in the post-Cold War period was motivated by the roll-back of Russian influence from these strategic areas. Control of this region was crucial for any aspirational country which aimed to gain a dominant position in the Euro–Asian area (VUKADINOVIĆ 1998).

During the Cold War, the U.S. provided strong support to the former Yugoslavia, which Washington perceived as a means of maintaining a strategic balance with the Soviet Union in the Southeast Europe area. In the U.S. perception, despite the socialist arrangement, Yugoslavia represented a buffer zone between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, essential for preventing the spread of the Soviet influence towards the Mediterranean. Consequently, Washington consistently supported the right of Yugoslavia to maintain its independence and territorial integrity, and it avoided any significant criticism of human rights violations within the country.⁵ This fact is significant because the George H. W. Bush Administration's policy during the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1990–1991 was based on the above mentioned Cold War patterns. Only the escalation of the conflict in the second half of 1991 initiated a gradual change in Washington's policy towards the region.

After the Cold War, the U.S. opted for stability in the region under the leadership of the West. This outlined the framework for the relations between the U.S. and the Republic of Croatia.

⁵ For more information on the relations between the U.S. and Yugoslavia in the period from 1949 to 1990 see e.g. LUKIĆ–LYNCH 1996, 303–307.

2. 1991–1994: The Breakup of Yugoslavia and Croatia’s Homeland War

The period from 1991 to 1994 was characterised by the question of recognition of the Republic of Croatia and the quest for the development of relations with the U.S.

2.1. U.S. diplomacy and the dissolution of Yugoslavia

The principal objective of U.S. foreign policy towards Yugoslavia from 1990 to 1991 was to preserve its unity and later, when the extreme violence erupted, to give the European Community a chance to deal with what was called a *European problem*.

Mr. Warren Zimmermann, the last U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia (in office from 11 July 1988 until 16 May 1992), commenced his mandate by reasserting the traditional mantra of the U.S. support for Yugoslavia’s unity, independence and territorial integrity, but only in the context of democracy, actively opposing unity imposed or preserved by force. Expecting that the worst-case scenario for Yugoslavia would be the breakup of the country, Ambassador Zimmermann and his political and economic officers knew that no breakup could happen peacefully. The U.S. administration understood that the Serbian territorial ambitions, the ethnic hatred disseminated by Slobodan Milošević, and the mixture of ethnic groups in every ex-Yugoslav republic – except Slovenia – meant that developments in Yugoslavia would lead to extreme violence, perhaps even war. Thus, Ambassador Zimmermann argued for at least a loose unity, with the endorsement of democratic development (ZIMMERMANN 1995).

From August through November 1991, the siege and shelling of the town of Vukovar by Serb forces, accompanied by the bombing of Dubrovnik in October 1991 attracted significant publicity and attention, and contributed to an international movement to support the recognition of Croatia’s independence. The use of force was considered by Washington a red line in late 1991 (ZIMMERMANN 1995).

2.2. *U.S. recognition of Croatia's independence*

The central ambition of the Croatian Government in 1991 was the independence of the Republic of Croatia, and the international recognition of the new state. In this context, the recognition by the U.S. was of particular importance. Washington officially supported the preservation of Yugoslavia, but not at all costs. Although many in Croatia expected that the U.S. would support the democratic movements and the democratically elected new governments in Croatia and Slovenia, Washington still gave priority to the support of the Yugoslav federal government led by Ante Marković, expressing deep suspicion of the motives of the new governments in Slovenia and Croatia.⁶ The primary intent of the U.S. diplomacy was to achieve and maintain stability in Eastern Europe. The political orientation of the U.S. may be depicted by the statement of then Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs James F. Dobbins on 21 February 1990, in which he emphasised that the determinants of the U.S. policy towards Yugoslavia were supporting democracy, dialogue, human rights, economic reforms and unity (LUKIC-LYNCH 1996, 310; DOBBINS 2004). Washington sought to prevent the further escalation of conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and thus the need for direct military engagement by the U.S. In this context, Washington did not support the intentions of Croatia and Slovenia for unilateral separation, insisting that the only solution to the Yugoslav crisis could be inter-republic negotiations that will either lead to the reform of the Yugoslav federation or a peaceful separation (MOREL 2008, 355–356). These efforts ultimately proved to be unsuccessful.

The escalation of the conflict in Yugoslavia in October 1991 led finally to a change in Washington's policy. However, this was not the change that Croatia wanted. After the apparent failure of the current approach, Washington chose the 'wait and see' policy, i.e. passive monitoring of the developments before defining a new mode of action. After having completed the Desert Storm Operation successfully (in response to Iraq's

⁶ Representatives of the Bush Administration had doubts about the new nationalist political leaders in Slovenia and Croatia. According to their perception, Slovenes showed no interest in the fate of the other Yugoslav republics, and Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and his HDZ Party, in their perception, dazzled by fascism and showed readiness to introduce discriminatory measures against Croatian Serbs (MOREL 2008, 354–355.).

invasion of Kuwait), Washington did not show the desire to undertake a new military intervention. Also, the worsening of the political situation in the former Soviet Union had a priority over the case of the former Yugoslavia.

After the European Community's (EC) recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in December 1991, Washington revised its policy of supporting the maintenance of Yugoslavia. The U.S. recognised Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as independent states on 7 April 1992 (BUSH 1992). For the Bush Administration, the recognition of the independence of Croatia and the other republics of the former Yugoslavia was not a strategic interest at that time (RAMET 2008).

The reason for the decision was that the U.S. did not have an interest to independently carry out a military action in BiH. U.S. action through NATO was also excluded because of the possibility of disapproval of other Alliance members, which would have undermined NATO's cohesion. In the end, the U.S. abandoned the idea of unilateral action and left the initiative to its European allies. This policy remained in place during the entire tenure of President George H. W. Bush.⁷

President Clinton announced a more active role for the U.S. in resolving the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia to prevent the spillover of these problems to Southeast Europe. The efforts of the U.S. were also motivated by the fact that the EU was unable to stop the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which created the need for Washington to actively engage in resolving European security issues (including the question of NATO's future, and the relations with the Russian Federation). Besides, it also sent a message to European allies, showing that solving problems in the global security environment was still not possible without U.S. leadership.

In the first year of the new administration, Washington tried to implement three measures of pressure on Serbia: removal of the arms embargo imposed on BiH, strengthening the sanctions against Serbia through UN mechanisms, and launching limited air strikes against Serb forces in BiH. The lack of support from European allies, along with Washington's unwillingness for unilateral action had led to the maintenance of the *status quo*. In this period, an important decision of the new U.S. administration was to support the territorial integrity of Croatia by adopting a position that the

⁷ To find out more about the Bush Administration's policy on the dissolution of Yugoslavia, see HENRIKSEN 2017, 75–81.

solution of the situation in Croatia and BiH must take into consideration the existing international borders. That position was apparent in the U.S.'s efforts to gain the UN Security Council's support for the recognition of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia (GALBRAITH 1998, 426).

The crucial change in the U.S. policy towards the conflict in BiH took place in February 1994, after the Serbian bombing of the Markale marketplace in Sarajevo.⁸ The large number of civilian victims have provoked a strong condemnation of the passivity of Europe, and it opened the possibility of active U.S. engagement. These events also opened the door for the development of a strategic U.S.–Croatia partnership.

3. 1994–2003: Partners in the Resolution of the Crisis in the Western Balkans

The period from 1994 to 2003 was characterised by the establishment and the development of the strategic partnership between the Republic of Croatia and the U.S. The conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia facilitated a renewed engagement with the U.S. in European security. A private military contractor, the Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI) was used as a means of “silent” U.S. support to the Republic of Croatia. The Croatian contribution to Operation Allied Force⁹ in 1999, and the “Boka Star” case in 2002 represented the pinnacles of this cooperation.

3.1. Active U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans

The Clinton Administration's decision to intervene in this conflict was motivated by the strengthening of U.S. influence in Europe, particularly with regards to NATO's future and the development of economic relations in the transatlantic region. The change of Washington's policy towards the conflict in BiH had also contributed to the establishment of a strategic

⁸ To find out more about the Clinton Administration's politics towards the conflict in the former Yugoslavia between 1993 and 1995, see HENRIKSEN 2017, 119–133.

⁹ NATO launched Operation Allied Force in response to Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's campaign of ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians. The air strikes lasted from 24 March 1999 to 10 June 1999.

partnership between the U.S. and the Republic of Croatia. The Clinton Administration's strategy in BiH was based on the creation of an alliance between the Bosnian Croats and the Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), which was not possible to achieve without the active co-operation of Croatia, who assisted the Bosnian Croats. Washington intervened directly to end the Croatian–Bosniak conflict in BiH. The conflict came to an end in the second half of 1993: both sides signed an agreement in Washington in March 1994 to establish a joint Croatian–Bosniak Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, covering half of the total territory of BiH. For the U.S., the signing of the agreement helped to create the conditions for curbing Milosevic's aggression, which was perceived as the primary source of instability in the Balkans.¹⁰

3.2. The role of the U.S. in the transformation of the Croatian Armed Forces

In the development of the partnership, the U.S. military assistance had a significant influence, which was provided through a private security company, MPRI. This form of aid allowed circumventing the UN embargo on the export of arms and military equipment to the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Two contracts were concluded between Croatia and the MPRI on 27 September 1994. The first contract was aimed at assisting the restructuring of the Croatian Defence Ministry. Its implementation began in January 1995, under the guidance of a retired U.S. Major General, John Sewell.

The second contract (*The Democracy Transition Assistance Program*) was oriented towards the organisation of the education and training of staff officers. For the implementation of this project, the MPRI sent to Croatia a team of 15 people, led by retired U.S. Major General, Richard Griffiths. The first generation of Croatian students completed the course in April 1995. For the Croatian side, this was an opportunity to obtain the necessary military expertise and training, required for the further development of the Croatian Armed Forces. This was part of the preparations to liberate the occupied parts of the country that was planned for 1995. This

¹⁰ To find out more about the American action that led to the signing of the agreement, see MOREL 2008, 360–361.

way, the Clinton Administration avoided direct military engagement in the support of Croatia.¹¹

The training had a positive effect on the improvement of the operational capacity of the Croatian Armed Forces. The operations of the Croatian Armed Forces carried out in the summer of 1995 were good examples of that (AVANT 2005, 109–110). The long-term effects were even more visible as the MPRI's program was based on meeting the standards and guidelines for entering the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program (restructuring Croatia's Ministry of Defence [MoD] for long term strategic capabilities, democratising the military and reorganising the structure of forces), and contributing significantly to the professionalisation of the Croatian Armed Forces. Subsequently, the military education program arranged by the MPRI also had a significant impact on the domestic political affairs of the Republic of Croatia between 1995 and 2000 (the contract itself brought substantial political benefits to the governing HDZ party of Tudjman). The contract had an important impact on morale (showing that the U.S. was on Croatia's side), and the long-term transformation of the MoD and the structure of the forces (AVANT 2005, 110).

The informal military assistance provided by the U.S. through the MPRI was replaced after 1994 by the establishment of direct military co-operation, however the MPRI continued to work in the Republic of Croatia even after 2000. Croatia's entry into the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) program on 29 November 1994 enabled Croatia to conduct joint military exercises with the U.S. The program allowed the training of Croatian military personnel in the U.S., and helped the organisation of activities in Croatia which were aimed at assisting Croatia's efforts to join the PfP and in the longer-term become a fully fledged member of NATO.

3.3. Towards the end of the Yugoslav Wars

Despite the established partnership, the relations of the U.S. and Croatia between 1996 and 2000 were burdened with a series of problems. The U.S. particularly criticised Croatia in the area of human rights, the development

¹¹ To find out more about the activities of the MPRI in the Republic of Croatia, see SINGER 2003, 127–129; AVANT 2005; AVANT 2009.

of the democratisation process, and the implementation of the Dayton Agreement (to find out more about the U.S. view on Croatian foreign policy, see LARRABEE 1996, 103). Tensions between the sides were visible even at the end of 1995. Washington, for example, emphasised that by using U.S. military assistance provided through the MPRI, the Republic of Croatia became its strategic ally. At the same time, a warning was given that the Croatian side cannot use the military capabilities gained through U.S. assistance against the interests of Washington, and Croatia cannot use these capabilities for a possible military action aimed at the liberation of the then-occupied Croatian Danube river region, either (COHEN 1995).

Following the signing of the Dayton Agreement Washington's priorities changed. In the U.S. perception, the achieved stability could have been preserved by encouraging the process of democratisation and economic development, especially in the two key countries of the region – Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which was constructed by the republics of Serbia and Montenegro. These changes would have also allowed a long-term U.S. influence in Southeast Europe. In this strategy, Washington expected the support of Zagreb as a catalyst for change in the region.

The U.S. sought to promote the process of democratisation through a rigorous oversight of the Croatian Government's activities, monitoring the Croatian implementation of the provisions of the Dayton Agreement, and the Croatian co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.¹² The U.S. dissatisfaction with the Croatian Government's policy and its democratic deficit became evident in June 1997 when Washington blocked the \$30 million World Bank loan to Croatia and called the Council of Europe two months later to suspend Croatia. Between 1996 and 1999, Washington doubled its financial aid to Croatia (\$74.97 million), but most of the funds were used to finance the Support for Eastern European Democracy (SEED) Act in the Republic of Croatia.¹³ This strat-

¹² To find out more about the expectations of the U.S. with regards to the relations with Croatia, the disappointment of the Croatian non-compliance with the democratic norms, and Croatia's policies towards BiH, see MOREL 2008, 366–367.

¹³ The SEED program was one of the key instruments of the U.S. to promote the process of democratisation in Eastern Europe. In Croatia, the SEED program was focused on three areas: financing programs related to the removal of the consequences of war activities (51%), promoting democratisation (27%), and economic restructuring (22%) (PINNA 2013, 181–182.).

egy in the second half of the 1990s was aimed at encouraging changes by strengthening the democratisation process as part of a broader Western Balkans stabilisation program.

Washington was dissatisfied with the authoritarian rule of the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman. That criticism has led to a significant cooling but not a complete interruption of the relationship between Zagreb and Washington. Despite this, cooperation between the two countries in the defence area had developed well. In fact, between 1996 and 2000 the only area where the co-operation was successful was the defence sector. Croatia provided support to NATO's military intervention in Kosovo, participating in Operation Allied Force (NATO 2016). Croatia provided NATO with access to its air and maritime space. As a result of Croatia's support, President Clinton abolished the embargo on the sale of U.S. arms to the Republic of Croatia (which formally demolished the UN embargo), and funds were increased for the IMET program. Despite the disagreements, the Republic of Croatia was confirmed as an American ally in the region. The full normalisation of relations followed the parliamentary and presidential elections in Croatia in 2000, with the arrival of the Social Democratic Government of Ivica Račan. The principal objective of the new government was the acceleration of Croatia's Euro-Atlantic integration (NATO, EU), which required the support of Washington (VUKADINović 1996).

3.4. Croatia's way towards the Euro-Atlantic community

In the defence sector, strengthening Washington's support for Croatia's accession to NATO was indicated by Croatia's accession to the PfP in May 2000 and by its addition to the Membership Action Plan (MAP) in May 2002 (MONTGOMERY 1998). At the NATO summit in Prague in November 2002, the presidents of Croatia, Albania and Macedonia proposed to Washington to launch a new U.S.–Adriatic Charter initiative, with a view to preserve the policy of open doors.¹⁴ The Charter was signed in Tirana on 2 May 2003 by Croatia, Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in which the three NATO aspirants pledged their commitment

¹⁴ For the Croatian views on the meaning of the American–Adriatic Charter, see GRDEŠIĆ 2004.

to NATO values and their cooperative efforts to advance their collective NATO aspirations. The Adriatic Charter later expanded to include two new countries in 2008: BiH, and Montenegro.

3.5. Croatia as a reliable partner

The George W. Bush Administration marked the return of the Republican Party to power, and the end of the U.S. foreign policy campaign in the Balkans. Following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the U.S. gave priority to the global war on terrorism.

In these circumstances, the Western Balkans started to lose importance (in particular because Russia was weak and unable to maintain its expansionist policy, and it was forced to cooperate with the West). This led to a gradual withdrawal of the U.S. from the region, and the limitation of its indirect support for the stabilisation of the region, which was transferred to the EU. Washington gave up the responsibility of the political and economic stabilisation of the Southeast region, which ultimately led to the EU's failure to achieve this task.

Despite all the problems, the strategic partnership between Zagreb and the U.S. has been thriving, as demonstrated by the case of the seizure of the "Boka Star" commercial ship. The ship was seized by Croatian officials on 22 October 2002 at the port of Rijeka, after it left the port of Bar in Montenegro. The seizure followed a warning from U.S. intelligence on the suspicion that the ship was being used for arms smuggling. The ship's cargo (loaded at Bar, Montenegro) included 14 transport containers of chemical pellets, declared as activated carbon and water filters, which was in fact 208,337 kilograms (459,304 lbs) of explosives, consisting of nitrocellulose and nitroglycerin (Croatian Ministry of the Interior 2002).

4. 2003–2006: Diverging Views on Croatia's European Future

The period from 2003 to 2006 was characterised by a relative deterioration of U.S.–Croatian relations. The principal cause was the insistence of the new U.S. administration to grant immunity to U.S. citizens on Croatian territory from extradition to the International Criminal Court

(ICC). At the same time, the U.S. Government also insisted that Croatia must cooperate with the ICTY.

4.1. Diverging views and disagreements

In 2003 Zagreb expressed its disagreement with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Croatian Prime Minister, Stjepan Mesić said in a televised address immediately after the U.S. attack on Iraq that the U.S. actions marginalised the UN, created divisions within the EU and questioned the foundations of the international order. At the opening of the new U.S. Embassy, Mesić condemned the American pressure on Croatia, causing a fierce U.S. reaction. One day later, in an interview published in the *Slobodna Dalmacija* newspaper U.S. Ambassador Lawrence G. Rossin condemned the Croatian Government's decision not to support the U.S. intervention in Iraq (KLAUŠKI 2002). During his visit to Croatia on 8 February 2004, then U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld voiced hope that the new Croatian Government would consider giving the U.S. some support in Iraq. The U.S. expected a support that would correspond to Croatia's ability and its capabilities (they did not insist on the participation of the Croatian military, but the U.S. wanted to see Croatia as a member of the "coalition of the willing" in the reconstruction phase of the Iraqi War). Despite the U.S. requests, the new Croatian Government maintained the same attitude as the previous one.

According to U.S. sources, disagreement between the two sides on several issues caused the cooling of relations with Croatia. There were "six sins" of the Croatian Government that, according to sources close to the State Department, burdened U.S.–Croatian relations at the time: 1. Lawrence Rossin (then U.S. Ambassador to Croatia) filed complaints to his superiors in Washington on the interpretation of the Croatian Government and Goran Granić (then Minister of Foreign Affairs) for publicly criticising his work; 2. Croatia refused to sign the bilateral agreement with Washington on the exemption of U.S. citizens before the ICC; 3. Croatia did not endorse the Ship Safety Act related to U.S. Navy vessels when they visit Croatia's harbours; 4. inconsistency about sending Croatian troops to Iraq, and more generally about co-operation in the post-conflict stabilisation of Iraq; 5. Croatian politics (then President of the Republic, Stjepan Mesić in particular) publicly denounced the war in Iraq, and said that the

U.S. goals were highly debatable; and 6. the American assessment that the return of Serb refugees, defined in the Dayton Agreement, is running too slowly (PUKANIĆ 2003).

At the end of May 2003, U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Croatia, Lawrence Rossin warned the Croatian Government that the U.S. military aid of \$19 million would be suspended in case the Croatian side did not sign the agreement on non-extradition by 1 July 2003 (Article 98), and even suggested that the lack of cooperation would question the future of Croatia's membership in NATO. On 1 July 2003, the State Department announced that Croatia was among the 35 countries where the Bush Administration suspended all American military assistance because they refused to give American citizens immunity before the International Criminal Court (BECKER 2003). Consequently, the Croatian rejection of the signing of this agreement led to the abolition of U.S. military assistance in the period from 2003 to 2008.¹⁵

The cooling of the relationship led Washington to begin to consider the possibility of strengthening relations with the FRY. This also meant a long-term prospect for the Yugoslav side to become the leading U.S. partner in the region. In the U.S. assessment, Serbia (still in the union with Montenegro) occupied a strategic geographic position in the Balkans as a junction at the intersection of the routes between Western and Eastern Europe, representing an important component of the geostrategic competition between the West and Russia. In Washington's perception, a modernised Serbia, free from Russian control, could potentially represent the engine of economic growth for the entire Balkan region (MORELLI 2018).

Consequently, the deterioration of Washington's relationship with Croatia between 2003 and 2006 led to an improving strategic partnership between the U.S. and the FRY (PINNA 2013, 188). Ultimately, the expectations have not been met. Despite the U.S. efforts and the invested funds, the political and economic stabilisation of the former Yugoslavia did not follow. The influence of the Russian Federation has not been suppressed either – on the contrary, it became even stronger. The U.S. recognition

¹⁵ The funding of current programs from 2001 and 2002 was temporarily continued, but the military assistance for 2004 was suspended. By that time, the Republic of Croatia has used all funds received through the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program (roughly \$12 million). For 2003, the Republic of Croatia should have received \$5.5 million in the FMF program, \$967,963 in the IMET program, and \$150,000 for the Joint Contact Team Program (JCTP) program.

of Kosovo on 17 February 2008 sparked a new crisis in the relations of Washington and Belgrade (SERWER 2008).

5. 2006 to 2018: The Reconstruction and Strengthening of the Strategic Partnership

The period from 2006 to 2018 was characterised by the reconstruction and strengthening of the strategic partnership. After 2006, the issues regarding the ICC have been resolved. The U.S. showed strong support for Croatia's membership in NATO, as it was shown in the breakdown of Slovenian obstructionism. The U.S. counted on the Republic of Croatia in its efforts to suppress the Russian influence in the Western Balkans.

5.1. A partnership restored

Regardless of the previous issues in U.S.–Croatian relations, the Republic of Croatia as the only politically and economically stable country in the region became a desirable U.S. partner again. For Zagreb, it opened up the possibility of revitalising the disrupted relations with the U.S. Both countries began the gradual normalisation of relations in 2006. The issue that triggered the most significant controversy – the ICC issue – was quietly sidelined (three years later, the Obama Administration changed the U.S. policy towards the ICC, and definitively removed this issue from the agenda). In response, the Croatian side has also increased its contribution to ISAF forces in Afghanistan.¹⁶ In 2009, Croatia also joined the KFOR¹⁷ in Kosovo by sending two Mil Mi-171Š transport helicopters together with 20 troops.

An indicator of the change in the U.S.–Croatia relationship was the visit of the then Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader to Washington on 17 October 2006, which was followed by the invitation of President George

¹⁶ ISAF has been the largest and the most demanding operation abroad for the Croatian Armed Forces. It has been implemented to assist the Afghan Government to establish security and to stabilise the country, to build and train its national security structures and to assist with the disarmament and the reconstruction programmes respectively.

¹⁷ The Kosovo Force is a NATO-led international peacekeeping force which was responsible for establishing a secure environment in Kosovo.

W. Bush. Before the visit, the U.S. ban on military assistance in the area of education and training programs was withdrawn. This was also apparent from the State Department report of U.S. Ambassador Robert A. Bradtke on 11 October 2006.¹⁸ The final confirmation of the full normalisation of the relations between the two countries was the visit of U.S. President George W. Bush to Croatia on 4 April 2008, which sent a message that Croatia was a reliable American partner in this part of Europe.

This also marked the end of Washington's attempt to develop a strategic partnership with Serbia. The U.S. appeasement with Croatia was seen as a measure of reducing Russia's influence in the region through the creation of some kind of sanitary cordon around Serbia, as Belgrade was still seen as a potential source of instability in the Balkans (RADOSAVLJEVIĆ 2008).

5.2. The U.S. support to Croatia's fully fledged NATO membership

The normalisation of U.S.–Croatian relations was visible in Washington's effort to prevent the possible Slovenian veto on Croatia's accession to NATO. When Slovenia threatened with vetoing Croatia's NATO membership in late 2008, due to the Croatia–Slovenia border dispute in the Gulf of Piran, Washington and then NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer put a diplomatic pressure on Slovenian politicians to ensure that the official invitations to Albania and Croatia to join NATO would be sent after the NATO Summit in April 2009.

¹⁸ U.S. Ambassador Bradtke stated in his report that Sanader's government had implemented a series of measures which were demanded by the American side over the previous three years. Among others: suppressing the right-wing extremism in Croatia, helping the extradition of Ante Gotovina to the ICTY, improving relations with the Serb community, and normalising relations with Belgrade. According to Bradtke's assessment, the U.S. should continue to cultivate Croatia as the key U.S. strategic partner in the region, and it should continue to form bilateral relations with Croatia in order to increase cooperation between the two countries in the political (civil aviation, law enforcement, and a Supplemental Status of Forces Agreement – SOFA), economic (increasing U.S. investments) and defence areas (supporting Croatia's candidacy for NATO) (Index 2010).

The U.S. demand was conveyed in early February 2009, asking the Slovenian Government to ratify the protocol of NATO enlargement. Despite attempts by certain Slovenian parties to organise a referendum on Croatia's NATO membership, Slovenia finally handed to the Alliance its signature as the last of the 26 NATO members (SIMONOVIĆ 2009).

5.3. Partners in developing stability in the Western Balkans

In more recent years, the two visits by senior Obama Administration officials have shown that the U.S. continues to develop a strategic partnership with Croatia, and that neither country has any open issues of a magnitude that could challenge the progress made so far. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Zagreb on 31 October 2012, highlighting Croatia's importance in the Western Balkans. At a meeting with Croatian President Ivo Josipović, Clinton emphasised the importance of the joint efforts of both countries in NATO, the role of Zagreb as an anchor of stability and progress in the region, and as a model for other Western Balkan countries (U.S. Department of State 2012). On 25 November 2015, then Vice President Joe Biden visited Croatia to participate in the "Brdo-Brijuni" process, which was launched in 2013 by the presidents of Croatia and Slovenia. In light of the security challenges in this area, and the activities of these countries in solving the problems in the region alongside allies and partners, including the Republic of Croatia, this meeting (along with an almost parallel visit by the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to the region) signalled the continuation of Washington's involvement in the events of Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans (Euractiv 2015; BIDEN 2015).

The U.S. counts on Croatia in suppressing the Russian political, diplomatic and economic influence in the region. Russian strategic behaviour, particularly in light of the crisis in Ukraine, is of increasing concern for the U.S. and Eastern European countries. This behaviour is often characterised by a subtle way of influencing political and economic dynamics in Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans region (KRASTEVIĆ 2015). The fragile banking systems in the countries of the region makes them especially vulnerable to foreign investment that can be used to plant instability, undermine integration and delay democratic development. In the energy security domain, for instance, the U.S. recommended that Croatia should

not choose the Russian Rosneft company as a new strategic partner to replace the Hungarian MOL. The U.S. Ambassador to Croatia, Robert Kohorst said on 12 February 2018 that the U.S. did not want Rosneft to buy the INA oil and gas company, noting it would be a “mistake” since Russia is a “disturbing factor in the region” (GARACA 2018).

Regarding the relations with U.S. President Trump, some aspects of the foreign policy between the two countries are well aligned. For instance, President Trump was the guest of honour of the Transatlantic Session of the Three Seas Initiative¹⁹ Summit, held on 6–7 July 2017 in Warsaw. President Trump expressed that the U.S.’ support to the Initiative can help to create a sustainable and accessible energy market, and it can bring the citizens of the region prosperity (President of the RoC 2017). However, being a member of NATO, and particularly among the members that devote less than 2% of the GDP for defence, Croatia belongs to the group of countries that are the target of President Trump’s criticism concerning the countries that do not contribute to an adequate burden sharing of the Alliance.

5.4. U.S. security assistance and aid to Croatia

The U.S. has played a significant role in the region in the post-Cold War period, providing political, economic and military support.

To show the scale of U.S. assistance, it is important to note that from FY2013 to FY2016 the Excess Defence Article (EDA) programme in itself totalled in \$197,697,425.

It also has to be mentioned that the U.S. provided many other means of assistance which have not been measured financially. One of them was the provision of the USAF strategic airlift for deploying Croatian troops to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

The total amount of funds for Security Assistance for Acquisition totalled in \$293,765,253 (ODC 2018).

¹⁹ The Initiative is devoted to strengthen concrete trade, infrastructural, energy and political cooperation in the area between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas. The members are: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

6. Conclusions and the Future Perspective of U.S.–Croatian Relations

In the post-Cold War period, the U.S. has had significant influence in the countries of Southeast Europe and, notably, the Western Balkans (Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo). U.S. engagement enhanced stability, as well as economic and democratic development, advancing U.S. security goals. Since the beginning of the 1990s, U.S.–Croatian relations have been marked by ups and downs, which ultimately led to the creation of a strong partnership. Given the above, what could be the future perspective of their relations?

The past of U.S.–Croatian relations suggests that the key factor of their development in the future will be the strategy of the U.S. towards the broader Southeast region. After the period of active engagement under the Clinton Administration in the 1990s, a gradual set-back occurred in U.S. direct engagement in the Western Balkans, evident in the actions of all U.S. administrations from 2000 to the present. The Obama Administration almost completely neglected the Western Balkans. That disengagement created a gap filled by Serbia's meddling in Bosnia and Montenegro, Russia's militarism and Turkey's Islamism. This was the direct outcome of the shifting U.S. focus towards the new challenges in the Euro–Asian and Pacific areas. Accordingly, the EU attempted to take a role as the principal security provider who can take over the tasks of long-term political and economic stabilisation from the U.S. and NATO. This, however, does not mean the complete withdrawal of the U.S. from the region (BARIĆ 2017, 59–61). On the other hand, it is apparent that the EU has not met these expectations due to the combination of several factors. Besides, as the relations between Russia and the West have turned for the worse since the Russian annexation of Crimea, tensions are also noticeable in the Western Balkans, where a geopolitical competition exists among a number of international actors (Russia, China, Turkey and the Persian Gulf states) seeking to reduce the influence of the West. This competition can cause severe consequences for all countries of the Southeast region, including the Republic of Croatia (BARIĆ 2017, 69–74).

In these circumstances, we can expect in the future a stronger U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans, especially if the EU proves to be incapable of reducing the influence of other geopolitical actors (notably the Russian Federation) in this area. It is unlikely that Washington will

again assume the role of the leading security provider. Rather, in the event of a major crisis in the region, the U.S. would organise a military intervention using the NATO framework. But, even then, after resolving the situation, the U.S. would most likely try to transfer the responsibility of achieving long-term stabilisation to the EU.

Arguably, the U.S. will not change the current strategy of indirect approach in the Western Balkans (MARUSIC–BEDENBAUGH–WILSON 2017). The focus of U.S. diplomatic and political engagement will probably attempt to reduce the influence of Russia in the EU, which has already provoked a reaction in Moscow. In such an approach, the U.S. must rely on its allies and partners in the Southeast region. This represents an opportunity to continue and deepen the relations between the Republic of Croatia and the U.S. The geostrategic position of the Republic of Croatia along with the U.S. efforts to strengthen its influence in the region, and the level of relationship achieved so far may be a sound basis for the continuation and deepening of their relations.

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