

CROATIA ON ITS WAY TO THE ALLIANCE

In the Fall of 2004, the Republic of Croatia has entered its third cycle of the Membership Action Plan (MAP, cycle 2004-2005), setting firmly itself a goal to attain, over that specific MAP period, a level of reforms which would enable it to begin Accession Talks with NATO. Croatia bases such an ambition on the progress it was capable of achieving so far, by a range of tasks it is setting to itself during the ongoing MAP cycle, and, surely, by its determination to carry them out, rapidly and comprehensively.

Croatia views itself clearly within the light of NATO Enlargement process, aiming to make sure, once the Alliance decides to conduct the next round of enlargement, that the country will be entirely ready for membership. NATO's Istanbul Summit Communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government of the Member-States, made a reference to Croatia, as well as to Albania and Macedonia, in the context of enlargement of the Alliance. The Communiqué specified that the Enlargement process, including the implementation of MAP, would be under continuous review and reported by the NATO Foreign Ministers and that, based on the report, the individual progress by aspirants towards membership would be reviewed at the next Summit. Croatia finds such a wording encouraging to its strategic ambition.

In NATO, Croatia sees a uniquely efficient collective defence system, capable of adapting itself to the changing political and security circumstances, held together by some vitally important shared values and interests of its Member-States, interests and values deeply shared by Croatia as well. Also, Croatia welcomes NATO's strong positive influence in terms of promoting a whole range of stabilising partnerships across the continent, and beyond.

Main achievements from which Croatia's NATO ambition stems are to be found in its fulfilment of a whole range of political, economic and

social conditions - a progress which has been embodied notably in Croatia's EU candidate status - as well as in the fulfilment of defence, military and security criteria, reinforcing decisively its NATO bid. While developing additional contribution to the allied operations, the country has entered into an advanced stage of defence reforms, aiming to transform its defence system and Armed Forces for participation in the system of collective defence and other NATO missions and tasks.

Domestic political and economic reforms, aiming to build a modern democratic society and functioning free market economy, provide Croatia's main pillar in its energetic pursuit of the integration into the EU and NATO. On top of a full range of general reforms, applicable to any other country in transition, Croatia is putting special efforts in ensuring the fulfilment of some 'Croatia-specific' criteria, addressing its specific circumstances: in ensuring the full right to unobstructed return and restitution of property of all refugees and displaced persons willing to return to their homes in Croatia; in ensuring the full and unconditional co-operation with the War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague, ITCY; in reforming the judiciary system, making it efficient and reliable, EU-compatible.

At the defence side of its reforms, intertwined with its NATO bid, Croatia is entering into a crucial stage. During 2004, an advanced stage of defence reforms has started, with an aim to reshape the defence system and Armed Forces for participation in collective defence, missions and tasks of the Alliance. By the end of 2004 the first draft of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) should be finalised. Once adopted, after being exposed to the public and expert discussions, it is to be followed by the Long-term Development Plan for the Armed Forces (2005-2015). In shaping its defence configuration, Croatia starts from a NATO membership, from its participation in a system of collective defence, relying on its mechanisms while providing Croatia's own contribution to the security of the Alliance. Parallel with that, Croatia's defence strategy is also guided by the future EU membership, paying attention to the foreign, security and defence arrangements within the Union.

What Croatia is doing defence-wise, is developing its Armed Forces with a view of making them well-balanced, responding to the realistic security threats, making them NATO-interoperable, capable of providing a distinct contribution to the Alliance, both in terms of the Article V obligations (collective defence) as well as in terms of 'non-Article V' operations (crisis management, peace-support), deployable, adaptable, efficient and well equipped, possessing credible but affordable, predictable and transparent finances, with an increasing share of the budget dedicated to the necessary modernisation.

In particular, while supporting firmly NATO's policies and initiatives, Croatia aims to provide a tangible, meaningful contribution to NATO's operations as well. This applies notably to Afghanistan, where Croatia continues to participate in NATO-led ISAF operation with its Military Police Platoon (with its support elements, in total 50-soldiers strong, serving the fourth 6-months rotation). The Platoon is recognised as doing a distinguished service, in one of Croatia's distinct 'niche' capabilities, Military Policy. Croatia is also sending its civilian contribution consisting of a diplomat and two police officers to the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) led by Germany in Fayzabad. It will be exploring other possible contributions, both civilian and military, for operations in Afghanistan. Together with Albania and Macedonia, it is setting up a joint military medical team for ISAF, to be deployed during the first half of 2005. As for NATO's mission of training the Iraqi Armed Forces in Iraq and abroad, the Croatian Government stands ready to examine its possible contribution, according to the requirements of the Alliance, Croatia's capabilities, and subject to the Croatian legal procedures relevant for such missions.

While pursuing its NATO bid, within the MAP process, individually-based, Croatia co-operates closely with two other aspirant countries, Albania and Macedonia, aiming to make this co-operation produce concrete results. Intensified co-operation within the US-Adriatic Charter, linking our three countries and the US on our NATO project, is also focused on supporting the stabilisation of the entire region, especially on supporting reform processes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro, starting with their effort to enter into NATO's Partnership

for Peace Programme. Also, the US-Adriatic Charter co-operation gets enlarged with a co-operation with the NATO Member-States neighbouring the region - Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey - as well as with NATO itself. An enlarged ministerial meeting of the US-Adriatic Charter Partnership Commission has been successfully organised along these lines, on the Brijuni Islands in Croatia 12-14 November 2004, under the Croatian 6-months chairmanship of the Charter.

One of particularly, and increasingly important aspects of Croatia's effort *vis-à-vis* NATO consists of stepping up efforts in conducting a comprehensive, open, transparent and competent dialogue with the Croatian public on all issues relating to NATO membership, on benefits and responsibilities arising from it. In terms of the functioning of the State Administration, the Government plans to reinforce coordination, integration, specialisation and improvement of work of all relevant government agencies engaged in NATO affairs, aiming to accelerate the accession to NATO as much as possible.

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