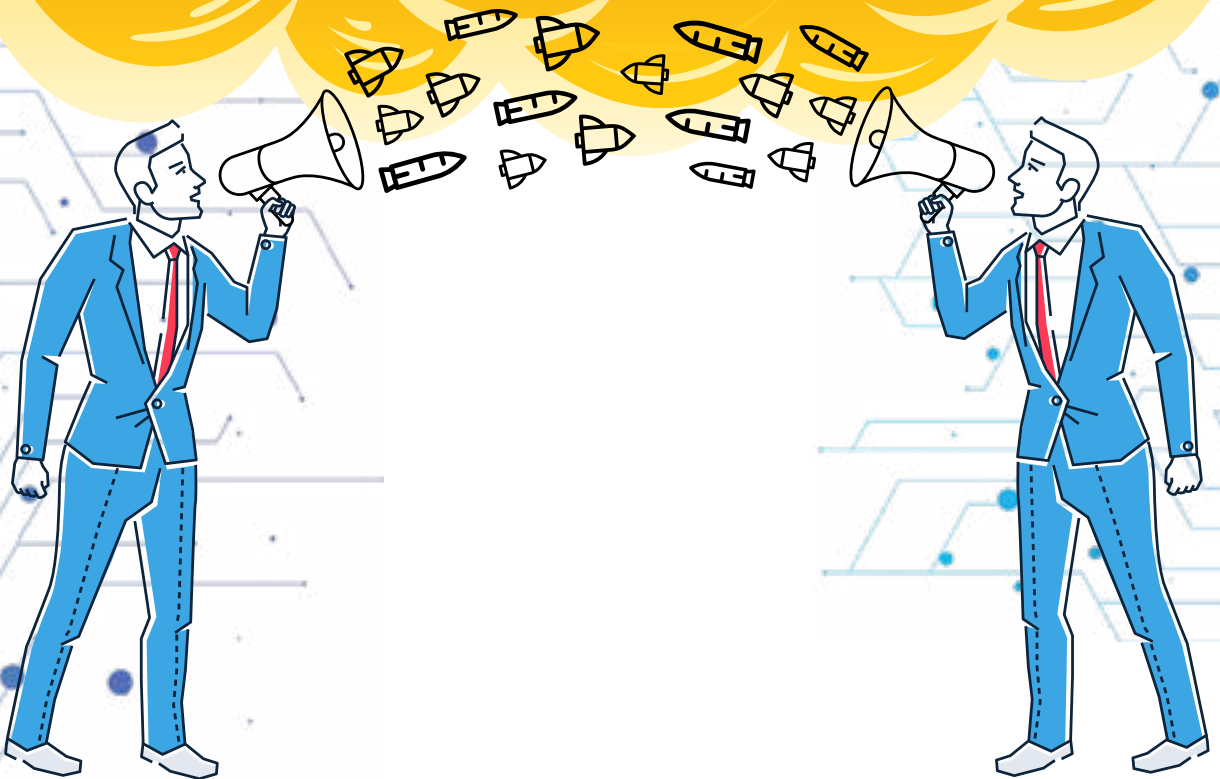


# A QUASI ARMS RACE: SERBIA AND CROATIA



**BCSP**

November 2021.



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November 2021.

## **Publisher**

Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku (BCBP)  
[www.bezbednost.org](http://www.bezbednost.org)

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## A Quasi-Arms Race: Serbia and Croatia

**In the last six years, Serbia and Croatia have been upgrading their military arsenals, leading to the conclusion that the two countries are spearheading a new arms race in the Western Balkans. This narrative is misleading as the strategic environment makes inter-state war unlikely and the process is actually about Serbia and Croatia replacing old equipment from the Yugoslav days. However, the two countries use arms procurement as leverage in their respective foreign policies and tools of domestic promotion for their ruling elites. The return of hostility is highly unlikely, but there is a political threat of cementing an atmosphere of mistrust in the region.**

In late May 2021, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković announced that his country would buy 12 used Rafale fighter jets from France in a deal worth one billion euros (\$1.2 billion), outbidding the US, Israel and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Croatia's largest military transfer since the break-up of Yugoslavia. Some Western media put this in the context of Croatia being involved in "a mini arms race" with neighbouring Serbia. Indeed, since 2015 Serbia and Croatia have been at the very heart of the process, many believe to be the new arms race in the Balkans.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite the impression one gets, we do not see a real arms race as the arms procurement done by Belgrade and Zagreb are part of modernising outdated military hardware that originates from the days of former Yugoslavia. However, what would normally be a regular process of replacing old and acquiring new hardware is being used by the two countries' ruling elites as tools of foreign policy and as a way to boost domestic standing. The prospect of war is not realistic, but the problem is that military modernisation occurs when political tensions still exist in the region. Therefore, the greatest ramifications from the current sabre-rattling is one where the atmosphere of mistrust in the region becomes politically cemented.

## Toys for Serbian and Croatian Military

The narrative of the regional arms race started to circulate in 2015 when Croatia asked the US to donate 16 Lockheed Martin produced rocket launchers M270 MLRS armed with ballistic missiles.<sup>3</sup> Incumbent Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister then, responded to this news: "Either they will have to change their mind, or we will have to find an answer to that." Serbia quickly started looking for an answer in Moscow. At the end of his visit to Belgrade in January 2016, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin gave a model of Russian missile defence system S-300 as a gift to Vučić, leading to the speculation that Serbia will get a real deal from Russia.<sup>4</sup> During 2016 Croatia entertained the possibility of returning the conscription service, justifying it with Serbian military buildup.<sup>5</sup> In Serbia, the same talks are ongoing in 2021.<sup>6</sup> The Croatian factor is not invoked, but even the idea of returning to conscription service keeps the arms race narrative alive.

In the end, neither Serbia got an S-300 missile system nor Croatia got M270 MLRS systems. However, the story did not end here, as both Belgrade and Zagreb have carried on with arms buildup since then. In 2017 Serbia's largest defence contractor, Yugoimport-SDPR, developed a Šumadija tactical missile with a range of over 280 km.<sup>7</sup> That same year, Serbia got six MIG-29 fighter jets from Russia, increasing Serbia's air policing capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Serbia received four MIG-29 fighter jets from Belarus in 2021.<sup>9</sup> Russia sold four Mi-35 and three Mi-17 military transport helicopters to Serbia,<sup>10</sup> to which it also donated T-72MS tanks, and BRDM-2MS armoured reconnaissance vehicles, all delivered in May 2021.<sup>11</sup>

In early 2020, Russia delivered to Serbia a rapid-fire anti-aircraft missile system Pantsir S1 with a 20 km range that can be used against cruise missiles, drones and low flying aircraft.<sup>12</sup> From European multinational Airbus, Serbia ordered nine Airbus H-145M helicopters, five for the military and four for the police force, expecting three more Super Puma helicopters.<sup>13</sup> In October 2021, Serbian Defence Ministry stated that it plans acquisition of additional H-145M helicopters, equipped with more advanced weapon system HForce 3. As part of the same arrangement, the acquisition of C295 transport aircraft for Serbian participation in multinational operations was also announced.<sup>14</sup> In 2019, Belgrade agreed to buy the French surface-to-air missile system Mistral.<sup>15</sup>

Military cooperation with China is also helping Serbia in military modernisation. In between 2008 and 2018, China was the second-largest army donor to Serbia after the US.<sup>16</sup> It should nevertheless be taken into account that the Serbian MoD did not include Russian donations in the official information and its value remains unknown to the public. The acquisition of six Chinese CH-92A drones and technology transfers that Serbia used to develop its drones, 'Pegaz' (Pegasus), allows Serbia to reconstitute its aerial reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities and become the largest drone operator in the Balkans.<sup>17</sup> To increase control over its air-space, Serbia will purchase the Chinese anti-aircraft FK-3 rocket system.<sup>18</sup> Serbia is in talks to buy anti-armoured SPIKE LR2 missiles from Israel,<sup>19</sup> and Serbia is also considering buying drones from Turkey.<sup>20</sup> As a result, in 2019, Serbia spent \$1.14 billion on defence, an increase of 43 per cent (\$326 million) compared to 2018, outstripping Croatia, which held a top spot in 2018.<sup>21</sup> Between 2018 and 2020, Belgrade spent more than three billion dollars on defence.<sup>22</sup> In 2021, Serbia unveiled an armoured combat vehicle Lazanski, named after recently deceased military commentator and Serbian ambassador to Russia.<sup>23</sup>

That does not mean that Croatia has been passive. In 2015 and 2016, Croatia acquired from Germany twelve artillery systems Panzerhaubitze 2000 howitzers.<sup>24</sup> In 2016, the US donated 16 Kiowa Warriors helicopters,<sup>25</sup> with one of these helicopters crashing into the Adriatic Sea in a fatal incident of 2020.<sup>26</sup> After first ordering them in 2017, in 2020, Croatia received AGM-114 Hellfire missiles from Lockheed Martin.<sup>27</sup> In late 2020, the US State Department approved a foreign military sale involving the modernisation of 76 Bradley Fighting vehicles of Croatia, alongside the delivery of associate equipment like machine guns and missiles.<sup>28</sup> After Croatia achieved a preliminary agreement to buy the upgraded US-made F-16 Barak fighter jets from Israel, the plan was scrapped in 2019 as the US forbade the jets to be transferred to a third party.<sup>29</sup> A setback later compensated with the acquisition of the French Rafale jets.

## Arms Race – Not So Fast

In theory, the new weaponry has combat utility in the Balkans. Some US analysts claim that Serbia could use Šumadija missiles against its neighbours if they take part in the future NATO attack against Belgrade, like the one in 1999.<sup>30</sup> The drones acquired by Serbia are powerful instruments in the hypothetical, localised conflicts in Kosovo or Bosnia. Croatian howitzers and attack helicopters are useful in the low-land Serbo-Croatian border, and Israeli SPIKE missiles are a potential equaliser for Serbia.<sup>31</sup> Although the news of new weaponry feeds the arms race narrative, the arms control expertise begs to differ. Article IV of Annex 1B of the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the Bosnian Civil War (1992-1995) has been the bedrock of arms control regime in the Western Balkans,<sup>32</sup> first under the auspice of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and since 2015 in the ownership of signatory states (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro). In five categories of weaponry covered by Article IV of Annex 1B, the battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft, and combat helicopters both Serbia and Croatia are within limits mandated by the regional arms control.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, launching a new conflict in the Balkans makes no strategic sense. Croatia has been a member of NATO since 2009.<sup>34</sup> Serbian attack on Croatia would activate the collective defence clause within Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty,<sup>35</sup> prompting NATO's response against Belgrade. Similarly, NATO still has 3,600 troops within its mission in Kosovo, the Kosovo Force (KFOR),<sup>36</sup> ensuring that the Serbo-Albanian dispute over Kosovo will not be resolved with war. After the Croatian military operation "Storm" in 1995 during the war in Croatia (1991-1995), resulting in the expulsion of 200 000 Serbs from Croatia,<sup>37</sup> the threat of ethnic separatism is not realistic for Croatia. The same situation is in Serbia, as its Croatian community is small and in demographic decline as the Serbian community in Croatia.<sup>38</sup>

It would also be folly for Croatia to launch an offensive against Serbia. In the age of nationalism, it has become almost impossible to control territories inhabited by a hostile population, even for the most powerful militaries. The fear of being bogged down in land warfare with partisan style insurgency, something well-known in Serbia and the Balkans, played a role in NATO's 1999 decision not to send ground troops limiting intervention against Yugoslavia to the air campaign.<sup>39</sup> If it was enough to deter NATO from ground invasion, it is enough to deter Croatia. Equally important is the fact that NATO-Serbia relations are different than in 1999. While Serbia does not pursue NATO membership, it is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme implementing the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest level of cooperation non-member state has with an Alliance.<sup>40</sup>

Waging wars and running large military formations has become expensive for local capitals. That is why Croatia replaced the conscription military service with a professional army in 2008,<sup>41</sup> and Serbia did the same in 2011.<sup>42</sup> This reality will not change no matter how politically popular it is in Belgrade and Zagreb to flaunt the idea of returning the conscription service to court conservative public opinion. The budget deficit has been a growing concern in Croatia in recent years, impeding defence planning.<sup>43</sup> Serbian military is experiencing a constant drain of professional cadre.<sup>44</sup> The region, as a whole, is lagging in socio-economic terms and experiencing a

demographic decline.<sup>45</sup> That not only deprives the local nations of the capacity to be engaged in prolonged warfare, but it also implies that the winner of that hypothetical war would be the master of nothing.

## Arms Procurement in Service of Foreign Policy

Instead, Belgrade and Zagreb are conducting a necessary military modernisation while using the process to score in their foreign policies. As the Ukraine crisis worsened relations between Russia and the West and brought security anxieties in Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, Serbia and Croatia responded differently to this new security environment.

In an environment where the West perceived Russia as a threat, Serbia saw an opportunity to use its traditional tactic of playing Russia and the West against each other.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, the arms buildup is both an end and a mean in the Serbian balancing act. By maintaining a balance between the two, Serbia hopes to have access to weaponry from both sides. Simultaneously, in the hope to make its balancing more credible, Serbia tries to have a formidable military force in its region. Military cooperation with Russia is a way for Serbia to increase its bargaining power with the West and get a better bargain on outstanding issues, like the Kosovo dispute.

As opposed to that, Croatia tried to raise its standing in the West, as up to that moment, Croatia was the latest member of both NATO and the EU. To do so, Zagreb tried portraying itself as the Western bulwark bordering the unpredictable region of the Western Balkans, susceptible to Russian meddling and unpredictable behaviour of Croatia's neighbour, Russian quasi-ally Serbia.<sup>47</sup> Croatia's National Security Strategy of 2017 does not mention Serbia, but it refers to "Southeastern neighbourhood" as "a source of potential challenges".<sup>48</sup> Defence modernisation is used to promote Croatia as the anchor of regional stability. In doing so, Croatia tries to uphold NATO's threshold of spending a minimum of 2 per cent of its GDP on defence. Indeed, Croatian Prime Minister Plenković stated that purchasing Rafale jets from France takes Croatia's defence spending beyond NATO's threshold.<sup>49</sup>

Due to the lack of transparency, it is hard to compare the military spending in the two countries. Even though its budget is more detailed and transparent than Serbian,<sup>50</sup> Croatia uses different methods to increase its military budget. Namely, Croatia pulled a bookkeeping trick to reach NATO's threshold.<sup>51</sup> It included war veteran pensions in its military expenditure, bringing it much closer to the desired goal.<sup>52</sup> Serbia's leaps in the military budget during the year, predominantly allocated for equipment and armament, suggest that procurement contracts are made ad hoc during diplomatic visits and to pursue foreign policy goals rather than on a comprehensive analysis and needs of the defence system. Thus, in 2021, Serbia increased its defense budget by 44% through a rebalance, only a few months after its initial adoption.<sup>53</sup>

## There's Always Domestic Politics

Political elites in both countries successfully use armament to score domestically. Armed forces are traditionally among the most trusted institutions in Serbia,<sup>54</sup> and in Croatia,<sup>55</sup> as 65% of citizens have high trust in the military in both countries. Flammable nationalist rhetorics is a tried and tested recipe in the region, used to mobilise voters and divert attention from burning economic problems and corruptive practices. The narratives of “arms race” and sharp rhetoric become most prominent during pre-election periods in both countries.<sup>56</sup> Ahead of the 2017 presidential elections in Serbia, front pages were full of reports about the arrival of 6 MIG-29 jets from Russia and headlines such as ‘Putin will defend Serbia with weaponry’ or ‘The Serbian Army will roar when the new MIGs arrive’.<sup>57</sup> More recently, the pro-government tabloid Kurir wrote that the ‘powerful Lazanski’ with its armament caused ‘hysteria in Zagreb’.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, both Serbia and Croatia had parliamentary elections in 2016, when the rhetoric sharpened and the ‘arms race’ started unfolding.<sup>59</sup>

Large-scale military exercises, broadcast live on national TV stations, are used to praise the capabilities of the Serbian Armed Forces and brag about the received and expected deliveries of military hardware.<sup>60</sup> The narrative about a strong army constantly pushed by politicians and pro-regime tabloids bore fruit in Serbia. According to a public opinion poll, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy conducted in 2020, the percentage of people who perceive the Serbian Armed Forces as capable enough to defend the country has increased to 48% since the current regime came to power.<sup>61</sup> The number of people who consider the army is well-equipped almost doubled in the previous decade and now stands at 40%.<sup>62</sup>

With scaremongering narratives of external enemies and the necessity to arm, it is easier for citizens to turn a blind eye to lowered transparency and different arms-related affairs. Hand in hand with armament, there was a noticeable decline in transparency in Serbia’s defence sector, particularly in finances and procurement, enabled by legalising bad practices.<sup>63</sup> For instance, legal amendments have allowed *a priori* declaring whole categories of data confidential – without going into its content, under the excuse of protecting national security. One of the categories marked confidential back in 2016 is human resources management.<sup>64</sup> Hence, the Serbian public cannot find official records about personnel in the defence system, and least of all, personnel drain - one of the biggest problems aimed to be pushed under the carpet through sensationalist reporting on armament and modernisation.

When it comes to procurement, not even the basic information is published regularly.<sup>65</sup> When the political moment is right, information about individual procurements is made public by President Vučić or other officials. Unlike in Croatia, long-term planning documents are not disclosed to the public. Hence, there is no way to oversee whether the money is spent following the strategic plans and needs of the defence system. In 2018, President even said he would “surprise” citizens and soldiers with a new procurement.<sup>66</sup> As a NATO member, Croatia’s transparency level is higher. However, still with certain limitations. By keeping the ghosts of the past awake and pointing the finger at Serbia, Croatia managed to keep most of the process revolving around the controversial purchase of fighter jets confidential under the excuse of national security and integrity of the process.<sup>67</sup>

Even though, most prominent, arms procurement are not the only fuel for sensationalist reports. Military exercises with different foreign partners, reintroducing conscription or donations from abroad often trigger a reaction on the other side. Political leaders and media on both sides are proficient in stirring the tensions and transferring the ball to the neighbour's court when necessary for scoring some populist points.

## | Conclusion

While the similarities with a real arms race are striking, the arms buildup in the Balkans led by Serbia and Croatia is not a genuine arms race. It is a process where Serbia and Croatia modernise their outdated hardware but spin it as an arms race for the domestic and regional public. This is done so that the elites in the two countries can use arms procurement as tools in their foreign policy both regionally and internationally. Incumbent elites are also using this process as a tool of domestic promotion and legitimisation. The return to the armed hostilities of the 1990s is highly unlikely, but the current process is still dangerous. It is dangerous because it also poisons local nations' political ties and decreases what little trust is left. Moreover, it speaks of the poor state of local governance, where spitting in the direction of your neighbours is a more appealing policy than dealing with economic welfare and the quality of public services. The war is unlikely, but as the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, the bullets do not have to be fired for the damage to be inflicted.



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