Policy paper

This policy paper is an output from the expert panel entitled „Strategic Communication: Evaluating Serbia’s Perception of the Euro-Atlantic Integration“, which took place on September 19, 2013 in Belgrade and was organized by the Slovak Atlantic Commission in cooperation with the Balkan Security Agenda and with the support of the Slovak Embassy in Belgrade – current NATO Contact Point Embassy (CPE). The main goal of the event was to identify most common perceptions, which Serbian population has towards NATO and explore possibilities of strengthening partnership between Serbia and the Alliance. The panel was held under Chatham House Rules and consisted of representatives of Serbian NGOs dealing with international and transatlantic relations, Serbian state institutions, media, public opinion research institute, international organizations as well as the Slovak Embassy in Belgrade.

Introduction

Serbia is currently the only country of the Western Balkans, which official does not strive for the NATO membership. This specific position is given by the political consequences and legacy of three events from the recent Serbian history – the NATO’s intervention against Bosnian Serbs in 1995, the NATO air-campaign in 1999 during the Kosovo crisis and the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008, which was recognized by most of the NATO member countries. This has had major impact on the Serbian public opinion and since then keeping the support of NATO membership or even deeper partnership on very low numbers. The issue is highly politicized and hence no Serbian government neither party is too eager to proceed too much in political relations with the Alliance and risking loss of support. Another major obstacle is broadly interpreted self-declaration of neutrality, passed by the Serbian Parliament in December 2007 packed as the “Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia”, this rules out the membership would come any time soon, however does not limit Serbia from participating in Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP). It is a paradox, but the support for country’s participation in the PfP is relatively high – definitively higher than the support for NATO membership, that can be however attributed more to lack of information and the lack of knowledge that PfP is basically NATO framework.

Serbia joined the PfP in 2006 and formalized its relations with NATO. The same year NATO Military Liaison Office was established at the Serbian Ministry of Defence (MoD SRB). Since then political as well as military cooperation between NATO and Serbia have been developing with different speed and intensity. In spring 2011 first Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) has been drafted and later that year presented in Brussels – however has not been implemented through 2012 and 2013. The first IPAP outlined objectives and activities as well as timelines and resources needed to fulfill the objectives. As main objectives have been envisaged defence reform, anti-corruption, economic cooperation and general transformation in areas of democratic reforms and human rights.¹

More intensive is cooperation of the Serbian Armed Forces (further just SAF) with NATO as well as the technical cooperation. Selected units of the SAF are being certified according to the NATO standards of preparedness for potential deployments in operations of the international military crisis management abroad – however, they are deployed mostly to operations and missions of the UN and EU, involvement in potential NATO operation would be

¹ - www.mod.gov.rs
still highly politically sensitive and hence not possible for the time being. Serbian officers as well as civilian experts take courses at NATO education institutions and members of SAF participate in common PfP trainings.

Serbia also offered its expertise and capacities in form of the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Training Center in Kruševac, in June 2013 NATO accepted this offer and the Center will be on the list of Partnership Training and Education Centers available for Allies as well as other partners.

NATO is active in Serbia also through Trust Funds, which are helping to solve some of the most pressing military safety issues – such was the project for liquidation of land mines implemented since 2005 – 2007 and more recently Trust Fund led by the United Kingdom and with expert involvement of the for liquidation of the surplus ammunition, which was launched in July 2013 and is intended to liquidate approximately 2,000 tonnes of decommissioned surplus ammunition of the SAF.\(^2\) Both activities were conducted in the Serbian Military Repair Institute Kragujevac (TRZK), which is being modernized for these purposes also from NATO funds.

Perception of the Serbian population of the NATO – its goals, role and activities.

Public approval of Serbia’s NATO membership is traditionally very low with around 80% against country’s membership in NATO, out of which around 50 – 60% strongly opposing the accession and with only 10 - 17% for NATO membership.\(^3\) There is a very small number of “don’t knows” answers in surveys (usually around 3% and less than 5%), partially because public in Serbia traditionally has strong opinions on many key issues, but in case of NATO there are even clearer opinions. Traditionally this level raises in regions with higher percentage of minorities, which usually do not want to present their opinions on behalf of the whole Serbia and are more prone to “don’t know” answers.

The public opinion in Serbia is influenced by the NATO military actions during the 90s in Bosnia and Herzegovina against Serbian troops, but even more by the NATO air campaign during the Kosovo conflict in 1999. Its impact on general population is higher, because it had direct effect on civilian population in whole Serbia (and Montenegro). Serbia (and Montenegro) is the only NATO PfP country with which the Alliance actually waged war in past. The Kosovo air campaign is considered by experts as a military success but a political disaster on NATO’s part. This is quite obvious perception also in regions, especially in regions, which were to some extent hit by the campaign and especially in regions, where civilian casualties occurred. Another quite common perception of these events is that NATO intervened in Bosnia and Kosovo to defuse Serbia’s power in former Yugoslavia and in the region. Some nationalistic groups in Serbia understand creation and development of Yugoslavia as Serbia’s effort and success and its bloody dissolution as a punishment of Serbia.

On the other hand general public is lacking deeper understanding why campaign in 1999 took place. There are number of myths connected with that – ranking among kind of conspiration theories and simple anti-Americanism – such as, the US/NATO wanted a military bases in Serbia, that’s why they bombed the country, caused change of the regime, separated Kosovo and now they have military bases in Kosovo.

According to the panel of experts this is quite a paradox, as former Yugoslavia used to have good relations with NATO even during Tito’s regime, when it declared itself “non-

\(^2\) - [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50100.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50100.htm)

\(^3\) - various public survey, for example compare with [http://www.jpsos.rs/](http://www.jpsos.rs/)
aligned”. There is also a positive example of cooperation between Serbia and NATO in tense period after 1999 air campaign – especially when in the year 2000 security situation quickly deteriorated in Preshevo valley, military solution was pushed back by the strong pressure of the democratic opposition in Serbia and with the help of diplomacy of the NATO member countries the situation did not escalated into heated, open conflict.

Second most common perception is that NATO is just the extended hand of the US foreign (and security) policy in Europe. The main role of the Alliance is supposed to consist of assisting the US administration to influence countries of the Western Europe as well as partner countries in order they act according to the America’s interests. The panel of experts suggested that more effort is needed to explain what EU is and how does it work and outline its role in comparison with NATO. EU membership, as opposed to NATO, is one of the main goals of the current Serbian government, which seems to be willing to do also unpopular steps to move on the Euro-integration path. Linking the two processes – EU and NATO integration - could be a partial solution and could bring tentative increase in support for Serbia’s NATO membership, but in longer run would not be sustainable. Cost-benefit analysis of NATO accession process is more difficult and not so seizable as is the case of the EU, where are clear benchmarks, which are mostly easier communicated towards the public, because they bring immediate results.

Another perception, identified by the panel of experts was so-called “Zero-sum-game perception of relations with Russia as opposed to closer relations with the NATO”. Serbia has traditionally good relations with the Russian Federation because of many reasons – among other also because of its position on the Kosovo issue, as dominant supplier of energy resources etc. - and tries to even strengthen these relations especially in economic area. Serbia is interested in developing Russian investments, which have been so far quite moderate, if compared with EU member countries and countries from the region. They are quite well publicized though, so the perception among public is actually higher than the real numbers show. Furthermore SRB is interested also in closer cooperation with RUS in area of defence and security – as outlined in the new bilateral agreement between RUS and SRB on defence cooperation (2013). Serbia therefore tries to balance relations with NATO and in 2013 it became an observer in Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

However, the perception of the general public is that the relations of Serbia with NATO are in direct contradiction to relations with Russia and this perception is until certain extend being shaped by media. Information about Russia are always widely protracted in Serbian media. More work is therefore needed to share balanced information about the NATO – RUS relations, work of the NATO-RUS Council, and highlighting fact that even some of the CSTO member countries are also members of the NATO PIP Programme or cooperate with NATO on some kind level. Hence relations with Russia are not exclusive to deeper cooperation with NATO.

When participants of follow-up public discussions in regions of Serbia were asked, whom they would prefer as a security guarantee of Serbia, most of them responded, that it should be Russia and very few raised hand in favor of the NATO. That is in quite discrepancy with reality, when especially the Serbian Armed Forces cooperate with NATO, they train, adopt and are certified according to the NATO standards – not Russian standards. Furthermore, Serbia is developing also very intensive bilateral cooperation in defence area with NATO member countries as well – notably with the USA (Ohio National Guard, State Partnership

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4 - Partnership Tour, 14. – 18. October 2013.
Programme, base JUG - Cepotina), GBR (leader of the Trust fund for liquidation of the surplus ammunition), GER, FRA, GRE, TUR and ITA.

This leads us to another perception – identified by experts as “perception of NATO as an entity”. One part of the Serbian population perceives NATO as an international entity – mostly of military character – which exercises its interests against its neighbors or other countries. They do not take into consideration, that NATO is an alliance of member countries – with most of which Serbia has actually very good bilateral relations. Participants of the follow-up public discussions in regions of Serbia were very surprised to learn for example, that such a good partner of Serbia as Norway is also a NATO member country – actually one of the founding members. Public usually does not connect NATO with its member countries and if so, then mostly only with the USA.

Last of the perceptions, identified by the panel, was: “NATO membership or even partnership is not in accordance with “virtual neutrality” of Serbia”. As NATO is quite a sensitive topic for the public, most of politicians in Serbia like to take legalistic approach and to hide behind very broadly interpreted self-declaration of neutrality, passed by the Serbian Parliament in December 2007 packed as the “Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia”. The Resolution mentions among other things also military neutrality – however without more taxative clarification, what that means. The panel of expert – especially representatives of NGOs – criticized this document, as it was passed already long time ago, without broader public discussion on the matter and by the political party, which is not in government anymore. The resolution reads, that it is not openly and directly intended against NATO, but in reality it is. The Serbian administration then explains limited cooperation with NATO, especially at the political level, by referring to military neutrality.

Neutrality is, according to the expert panel, very catchy phrase and popular among voters, yet at the same time very populist without real content. Most of the Serbian population connects the notion “neutrality” with Tito’s times of the Non-Align Movement during the Cold War. Today is this neutrality only virtual – it is not recognized by anybody, who would guarantee it as is the case of traditional neutral countries; Serbia strives for the EU membership and with that is connected also the CSDP, which basically denies neutrality of any EU member state; Serbia is involved in operations and missions of the international crisis management abroad – though frequently dubbed as peacekeeping missions, they frequently mean peace-enforcement; current threats and challenges does not recognize, whether country is neutral or not (terrorism, cyber security, energy security, international organized crime, natural disasters etc.); last but not least even historically - the Non-Align Movement in fact did not meant neutrality.

This is not an exhaustive nor exclusive list of perceptions of the Serbian population about NATO, just those identified and discussed by the expert panel.

**Conclusions and recommendations of the expert panel:**

The issue of NATO and Transatlantic partnership in general are not in the fore of the public discussion in Serbia. Number one priority is economic recovery of the country, then comes fight against unemployment and crisis, EU-accession efforts, social issues, fight against corruption, Kosovo issue. Security and NATO comes on last positions of public opinion surveys. However, the experts of the panel agreed, that it is needed to openly and frankly discuss also these issues especially for the government to show, it has nothing to hide nor has any hidden agenda concerning the NATO membership. To be able to do that, would however
mean, to stop thinking about the past and focus on the future. Paradoxically, normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and Serbia’s rapprochement with EU can help also with perception of NATO in Serbia’s public.

Public opinion can be changed, only if the change is outlined and led by Serbian political elites – that would mean to recognize publicly the extend of cooperation Serbia has with NATO and explain concrete positive impacts of such cooperation (Trust funds, interoperability, modernization of the SAF, operations and missions etc.). Public in most of the instances does not know about the real extend of the NATO – Serbian cooperation in military area. For example in year 2012 there has been planned 151 activities of military and expert character between Serbia and NATO out of which 119 have been successfully realized.

Apart from that, politicians are opinion-makers in Serbia and that’s why more discussion on and from political level is needed. Military might support the closer cooperation with NATO, but country cannot be moved towards NATO by generals and military – those must be top politicians. Especially members of the Parliament are the most important to be targeted in this respect.

Another important role in this process have media – they need to further information about NATO to broad public, benefits of partnership as well as potential membership have to be explained – similarly as it is being done in relations with the EU accession process of Serbia. Special role could play TVs, as much as 75% of public stated in polls that they receive information from TV broadcasting. However, key are political representatives, because there is a strong relationship between politics and media. Media usually do not want to spoil their relationship with politicians.

Panelists concluded that NATO is fighting and loosing hearts and minds in Serbia, therefore more and more effective PR, more information and more concrete examples of what NATO is doing in the country is needed. Also the follow-up public discussions in regions of Serbia revealed very low level of knowledge, about what NATO does in Serbia – with some rare positive exceptions like for example Kragujevac.

On the other hand, NATO cannot promote itself alone, it could be perceived as self-praises – here NATO member countries represented in Serbia come to the fore. Especially the NATO CPE in country should be the communication hub towards the public. Visibility of the CPE needs to be increased, especially when it is a partner country positively widely recognized in Serbia – such is Slovakia now.