

Croatia's police and security community building in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

The article examines the eventual existence of a security community within the Western Balkans region by exploring the contribution of police as a profession/epistemic community in Croatia to the security community building process. In order to do so, two theoretical concepts have been applied: first, the one of security community which, according to Deutsch, as well as Adler and Barnett, is something that is leading IR and humanity out of the era of nation-state; secondly, the one of professions as exclusive occupational groups in Abbott's interpretation (wherein the police is considered to be a profession). Our approach builds on a combination of the aforementioned theories, while the study itself has been based on the developments in the field of policing in Croatia since 1990 and its implications for the creation of a security community in the region.

Keywords: police, professions, regional cooperation, security community, Western Balkans

Introduction

After the fall of the bipolar international political system, Europe faced an entirely different reality accompanied by numerous challenges to its developing foreign and security policy. The violent disintegration of former Yugoslavia certainly belongs to the group of those with the most significant impact. After wars engulfed most of the former state for many years, there was finally a stage of calm and stabilization which was a consequence of the engagement of the international community. Disintegration did not only contribute to creating new borders and to the

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increase in the number of bilateral problems, but it also created a series of challenges to internal stabilization and democratization.

In post-socialist and post-conflict societies, especially those in which segments of the security sector were involved in war and violence, its reform represents a crucial step in creating conditions for developing peace and stability. Apart from the armed forces, the police was also engaged in war activities, as well as in other forms of violence during and after the war. Police reform represents a great challenge for societies which went through war and internal divisions that threatened stability, but also limited the development of democracy. Developing police forces capable to act in the new democratic environment and able to face all the dangers of transitional societies, such as organized crime and corruption, was very difficult for all states which were created after the fall of former Yugoslavia.

In the last two decades, all countries in the region have undertaken reforms of the security sector and the police in particular. At the beginning, they were directed toward building capacities for fulfilling the needs of national security, but later they started developing toward creating regional networks which would encourage cooperation and strengthen security relations between the states in the region.

This has significantly influenced the public opinion regarding the police as an institution in the wider framework of a state security apparatus and the role of civil society in this context. There have been many significant researches conducted on a variety of subjects related to the aforementioned, with the most recent one conducted by the regional think-tank network Pointpulse entitled ‘The citizens’ opinion on the police force’¹.

While previous researches were concentrated on the role of states and international organisations and institutions, this article attempts to introduce a somewhat new approach to the topic. It investigates the extent to which regional security co-operation developed, by focusing more on the day-to-day practice of security professions – more concretely the Croatian police – and their potential role in the development of the security community in the region in our focus.

The developments of the post-conflict two decades in the Western Balkans have shown that regardless of paramount investments made by both external and internal actors (states and international organisations) into the consolidation and institutional development of security structures, limited progress has been made in the field of establishment of security community. This very bottom-up process obviously needs to start among security practitioners in the region, which is not so simple due to the fact that they were adversaries not so long ago. Another reason for that is the socialist heritage in which state security officers are perceived as holders of pillars of the very core of state sovereignty. Therefore, an analysis of professions and epistemic communities in the wider concept of security community development

¹ Read more at http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/the_citizens_opinion_of_the_police_force.pdf

is of utmost importance for a post-conflict and post-socialist region like the Western Balkans.

By examining empirical findings from semi-structured interviews that were conducted, this research attempts to analyse the potential role of Croatian police as a profession, but also as an epistemic community, in the process of creation of the security community in the Western Balkans. In fact, it looks at the way the practice of Croatian police officers contributed to the departure from the unfavourable conflict environment and to the creation of a community characterised by mutual confidence and 'dependable expectation of peaceful change'.

Our main argument would be that, while progress in the overall stabilisation of the region and security cooperation in particular is inevitable, there is limited evidence that can support the existence of a regional security community. Namely, it is a fact that, on one hand, the changing security paradigm at the contemporary IR arena, where asymmetric threats require cooperative approach, coupled with the impact of EU and NATO conditionality, stimulated enhanced regional security cooperation. However, on the other hand, while evidence can be found about mutual relevance and basic responsiveness of units, as well as for compatibility of values, there is hardly any of it supporting generalised common identity and loyalty, which represents the most important indicator of tested theoretical framework. That, however, should not represent an argument for the 'de-energising' of the regional security cooperation in the forthcoming period, which remains essential for the overall stability of South-East Europe.

The article starts with a selected short piece on a theoretical-methodological framework that was chosen and its general relevance for this specific analysis. Furthermore, it deals with the combination of concepts used, its positioning with regard to the existing literature and strengths and limitations of chosen methods. After the brief introduction to the police profession that follows and argumentation on the relevance of the case of Croatian police for this research, the article focuses on its main component which offers the overall analysis of empirical findings tested against the selected theoretical framework. Only after processing the findings collected during the empirical part of this research and having them tested against the specific theoretical framework that has been selected, we were able to reach the conclusions that are presented in the final section of this article.

1. Theoretical-methodological framework

The two main pillars of the theoretical-methodological framework used for the purpose of this research are the concept of security community and the theory of professions. Their main postulates and general relevance for this endeavour will be elaborated in the following paragraphs.

The phenomena of security communities, according to its main proponents (Deutsch, 1957; Adler and Barnett, 1998), conceptualises the new discourse of the

IR where community exists at the international level, profoundly shaping security politics. Obviously, the states that are dwelling within an international community might develop a pacific disposition. Hence, in accordance with their approach, the process of political integration as a consequence of the perplexed nature of contemporary IR, contributes to the creation of communities driven by the idea about the existence of 'dependable expectation of a peaceful change'.

As Adler argues (Adler, 2008), security communities are communities of practice with cognitive evolution, likeminded groups of practitioners who are informally as well as contextually bound by a shared persuasion and ultimately their rational calculation. Security communities spread by co-evolution of background knowledge and subjectivities of self-restraint. He argues that the combined effect of communities of practice and the institutionalisation of self-restraint accounts both for the social construction of rationality, in the sense that cooperative security practices related to self-restraint help constitute dependable expectations of peaceful change, and for normative evolution in the sense that self-restraint brings about security through cooperation. Security communities as communities of practice, more specifically, represent a 'configuration of a domain' of knowledge that constitutes like-mindedness, a community of people that creates the social fabric of learning and a shared practice that embodies the knowledge that community develops, shares and maintains. Hence, according to that argument, people function as a community through relationships of mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity. Their engagement in a common practice makes them share an identity and feel they are 'we'. Furthermore, the argument is that collective identities entail that people not only identify (positively) with other people's fate but also identify themselves, and those other people, as a group in relation to other groups.

The constructivist theory of international relations regards international institutions as social ones and focuses on the process of socialisation which ordinarily takes place in the post-conflict period when political and social instability stimulates local institutions to adopt external influence. The region apparently mirrors the main features of that model, showing openness to external norms within the process of accession to the EU and NATO that could potentially lead to socialisation and creation of security community. This is the reason why this method, notwithstanding all its possible deficiencies, has been selected for this matter.

The scientific debate about professions is very lively and ongoing for quite some time but, given the diverse approach to the subject, it is difficult to detect a general definition that would be broadly acceptable. However, there are two outstanding authors that have shaped the scientific debate on this specific issue, representing two opposite discourses.

According to Abbott's interpretation and his 'very loose definition' (Abbott, 1988) within wider functionalist discourse, the professions are exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases. His

underlying questions concern the evolution and interrelations of professions and, more generally, the ways occupational groups control knowledge and skills. He argues that the evolution of professions in fact results from their interrelations. These interrelations are in turn determined by the way these groups control their knowledge and skills and he identifies two different ways of doing that: control involving techniques (crafts) and control using an abstract system of knowledge (professions). (Abbott, 1988) According to his argument, the central problem with the existing concept of professionalization is its focus on structure rather than work.

On the other hand, there is a structuralist discourse, where professions are predominantly viewed as a community within the larger one (society). According to Goode, from a broad inquiry into such structural relations between the contained community and the larger one, it may later be possible to derive important hypotheses about the forces that maintain both of them. A characteristic of each of the established professions and a goal of each aspiring occupation is the 'community of profession', which differs significantly from other types of communities and the containing one in particular. Typically, a profession, through its association and its members, controls admission to training and requires far more education from its trainees than the containing community demands. Both of the foregoing characteristics allow professions to enjoy more prestige from the containing community than other occupations can (Goode, 1957).

While these two theoretical concepts have been widely discussed and developed in the international IR literature (Deutsch 1957, Adler and Barnett 1998, Abbott 1988, Goode 1957), there are very few authors dealing with the security community in the region of Western Balkans (Vučetić 2001, Kavalski 2007, Grillot, Cruise and D'Ermain 2009, Simić 2011). Furthermore, there is almost no record of previous efforts to combine this concept with those of theory of professions and epistemic community and attempts to analyse the role of security professions and epistemic communities in the creation of a security community in that part of Europe. This research will try to fill this gap and respond to the following research question – What is the role of Croatian police as a profession/epistemic community in the process of transition of Western Balkans from a conflict zone to a security community? Of course, by formulating the research question this way, we are by no means prejudging either the existence of any role of Croatian police as a professional epistemic community in the aforementioned process or the actuality of the security community as a concept in the region. This will be an integral part of our research findings. We are also aware of the fact that our focus group - Croatian police - can actually provide its own perception of the process of development of security community in the region. However, the practical aspect of our research, related predominantly to accessibility of primary sources, obviously had an important role in defining our scope of research.

We decided to focus our research on the empirical aspect/dimension. The selection of semi-structured interviews have given us a useful set of tools, helping

us acquire a wide range of valuable information – empirical findings – to be tested against the chosen theoretical framework. More precisely, the semi-structured interviews gave us a fine balance of well organised but yet loosely informative framework of communication with security practitioners in the focus of our research.

2. Empirical findings

In order to carry out the comprehensive analysis of police as a professional and epistemic community and its development, we have to take into account the fact that Croatia's police as well as its cooperation with police structures in other countries were faced with numerous changes and challenges in the last two decades (Kutnjak Ivković 2009). On the other hand, the fact that there are different interpretations of police importance and the way its role should be assessed, coupled with its interconnectedness with other subjects of society emphasizes the complexity of this study. Therefore, this research can be perceived as a multidimensional task.

It is obvious that, during the last decade, the region has significantly moved away from the stage of conflict zone that negatively affected the security of its closer and wider surroundings and consequently, of the EU and of the international community to a certain extent (Grillot and Cruise, 2014). However, in order to comprehend the current stage of the regional transitional processes, one should test the aforementioned theoretical frameworks in practice and this is exactly what the focus of the empirical part of this research is.

The semi-structured interviews were used for that purpose, given the fact that they are more flexible than standardised methods, such as the structured interview or survey, and allow the exploration of topics instead of firmly relying on concepts and questions defined before the interview, despite the fact that some materials were prepared in advance. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews can ensure more detailed answers which were useful in the presentation of findings as well as in drawing our final conclusions regarding this matter. For obvious reasons, derived from the character of this method, one could expect that they would be helpful in testing the theoretical concepts presented beforehand.

Due to the post-conflict character of the Western Balkans in focus of our research and - more specifically - the fact that police forces were combating each other in the region during the 90's, the establishment and intensification of cooperation among them was regarded as an innovation for obvious reasons. Therefore, our interviews have been predominantly opened with a question about change/initiation of police cooperation. Furthermore, it was important to gather information about the reasons for a perception change within Croatian police about professional co-operation in the region. Namely, it varied from almost no interest for co-operation in the late 90's to the affirmative attitude towards a high level of bilateral and regional co-operation in the present period.

We were able to detect three main sets of motives/reasons² for the abovementioned changes:

- Transformation of security paradigm and new security threats;
- External conditionality;
- Increasing practical institutional and informal co-operation.

The analysis of these three sets of reasons/motives for a changed perception of Croatian police officers towards professional co-operation in the region actually represents 'a summary of findings' from our empirical research and is drawn exclusively from the responses we obtained at the interviews.³ The first two sets are obviously driven from outside the region, while the third one modestly develops as 'indigenous', but still as a consequence of the previous two.

2.1. Transformation of security paradigm and new security threats

The contemporary threats that appeared at the international arena in the early 2000s – in particular, terrorist organisations and organised crime networks with increasing level of organisational sophistication and usage of modern technology – have changed the security discourse significantly (Jespersion, 2017). Their capability to operate beyond borders of the states where they were founded and the practical difficulties of the transatlantic community to contain their effects efficiently have called for increased focus on a cooperative approach to security. These trends have been recognised by NATO as well in its 1999 Strategic Concept: 'The Alliance seeks to preserve peace and to reinforce Euro-Atlantic security and stability by...continued pursuit of partnership, cooperation, and dialogue with other nations as part of its cooperative approach to Euro-Atlantic security' (The Alliance's Strategic Concept 1999: 7). In the region in our focus, this is very relevant due to the fact that newly established states have found it very difficult to fight organised crime networks on their own in the aforementioned period.

As the majority of our interviewees have stressed, the fact that the transformation of criminality transcended the possibility to fight it within national borders led to a necessity for a common approach for newly established post-conflict states in the Western Balkans. The well-known 'Balkan Route'⁴ and organised

² These elements dominated the discourse of responses of majority of our interviewees on a question about motives for increased regional police co-operation.

³ There are no references to any particular interviewee – nor any information regarding their professional position – due to the fact that they were guaranteed absolute anonymity, as a basic precondition for permission to conduct any interview with both MoI officials and police officers.

⁴The Balkan Route has long been infamous as a passage along which illegal goods and immigrants are smuggled into Western Europe. It has been known mainly for the drug trafficking that occurs along this passage, most notably the smuggling of heroin from the largest producer – Afghanistan – to the greatest market for it, Western Europe. This has been

criminal networks in the region have been a great security challenge for relatively weak states with a limited capacity of the security sector (Stojarová, 2007). In order to prevent expansion of criminal actions, the establishment of cooperation between countries was of crucial importance given the fact that for matters such as organized crime, illegal weapons trade, human trafficking and drugs trade, ‘borders do not exist’.

Nevertheless, as our respondents point out, since not all countries in the region are facing identical security threats, it is difficult to envisage a uniform type of cooperation suitable for all regional actors. Moreover, by analysing police cooperation among Western Balkans countries, one may conclude that its level depends on the commonality of security threats with which they are dealing. As an example provided by our interviewees shows, the fact that Croatia has more than 1000 km of border with Bosnia and Herzegovina implies the importance of cooperation between border police units.⁵ On the other hand, criminal police cooperation with Serbia is very developed due to a need to tackle various cases in the field of organized crime and also, to a certain extent, with Montenegro on the specific issues of illicit trade of tobacco product and vehicles, while cooperation in the field of combat against drugs and human trafficking is noticeable with Albania and Macedonia.

Taking into account the abovementioned, one may conclude that, by the transformation of criminality, countries were put in the position where cooperation of their security sectors was the only way to overcome the threats they were facing.

2.2. External conditionality

The transition of Western Balkans was rather complex and, unlike in the case of Central and Eastern European countries, a two-tier process: from authoritarian towards democratic systems, and from conflict to post-conflict stabilisation.

Undoubtedly, it was not the most desirable environment for a consensual decision making mainly due to the fact that it was extremely difficult to achieve compatibility of interests for transformation between external actors and local political elites (Pridham, 2016), having the latter been not always ‘so enthusiastic’ about conducting needed reforms. As the majority of our respondents recognise, in

and is still a conduit for trafficking in arms and smuggling of goods and illegal immigrants (Foster 2012: 1).

⁵Namely, the length of the border and intensity of both legal and illegal transfer of humans and goods makes it very vulnerable to numerous criminal activities. Croatia’s recent accession to the EU makes this question relevant for the Union as well, due to the fact that it now represents the EU’s external border in the southeast. This is clearly visible from the fact that the EU’s main body tasked with migration, asylum, security and border management is dedicating significant attention to this respective issue, among others that are relevant, in its Western Balkans Annual Risk Analysis 2014 (Frontex 2014).

such an environment, the conditionality and assistance of external actors such as the EU was of significant importance.

Furthermore, they stressed that changes made at the regional level –in particular affirmation of political elites with positive attitude towards the regional co-operation - were an important factor for its initiation and development. The EU has taken a crucial role in the process of stabilization of the region and contributed very much to the process of initiation of cooperation and support to it (Ioannides and Collantes-Celador, 2011). Previously mentioned conditionality mechanisms in the process of enlargement to the region had an immeasurable role in that regard. The accession process to the EU has brought certain responsibilities, such as adoption of standards, procedures and practices which are present in developed Western countries (Grabbe, 2014). Among other issues, it meant fostering cooperation among countries in the field of internal affairs as the only appropriate response to transformation of criminality on various levels.

However, it should be mentioned that our respondents underlined the existence of awareness about the necessity of police cooperation on the regional level, especially in the field of fight against organized crime, which had been developed prior to the involvement of international actors. The major contribution of the external actors is visible in the fields of organizational framing, as well as in the facilitation of the development of personal contacts and experience sharing. Moreover, cooperation with the EU seems to have strengthened Croatia's position in the regional initiatives and supported its mentoring role among the other states (Cruise and Grillot, 2013) in the field of internal affairs in particular. On the other hand, the fact that there are differences in progress made by the individual states in their integration processes and implementation of international norms and standards presents an obstructive factor for the development of cooperation in the respective area. For example, by becoming an EU member state, Croatia was obligated to adopt standards of border control which are present in all other member states, while other countries in the region do not have the same type of border control and this is an obstacle for border police from both sides.

Moreover, they argue that cooperation is expected to develop not only with the Western Balkans countries, but also at a wider European and global level, given the fact that significant security challenges can be effectively addressed only in this way.

However, the respondents seem to be aware that, in order to extend these trends onto the region, next steps require stabilization and a mature level of confidence at the intraregional level. Namely, while it is clear that all countries in the region are adopting the same European values that correspond to those of the security community and are fostering practical forms of co-operation (Vachudova, 2014), the component that is still missing is mutual trust and identification with the region. In other words, while Croatian police officers find regional co-operation useful for various pragmatic reasons, they have not developed a sense of 'we-ness'

with other colleagues in the region and prefer to be considered a part of a wider transatlantic community. Their main objective argument is the fact that Croatian membership in the EU and NATO represents a showcase of successful adoption of all relevant European values and benchmarks, including those within the field of internal affairs. Therefore, its EuroAtlantic vocation is both merit-based and subjective and the 'we-ness' feeling with the countries of the Western Balkans can be feasible only after their accession to the respective structures, within a broader EuroAtlantic framework.

2.3. Increased practical institutional and informal co-operation

Security dysfunctions in the Western Balkans, with police units playing a very important role in the conflict, made both institutional and informal co-operation within this profession in the region a very demanding task. On the other hand, both of the abovementioned factors which are comprehensively analysed in the previous sections of this article (transformation of security paradigm and external conditionality) did not only encourage co-operation but have also set up higher standards whose implementation is crucial for its further development.

The establishment of police cooperation within Western Balkans region can be analysed through three periods, which we were able to detect during our research. During the first and second one, which were conflict and post-conflict time, police cooperation almost did not exist at all. However, what is interesting and worth mentioning, is the fact that organized crime groups never stopped their cooperation on the regional level during the first two periods. The last period began after 2000, bringing along initiation of police cooperation and its development.

Moreover, at the beginning of 2000, there was an obvious change of discourse within the framework of security debate in the region. Unlike in the '90s, when security threats were analysed only through 'national lenses' and the neighbouring states perceived each other as their main sources, one could have noticed a modest appearance of understanding that there are some common threats whose appropriate tackling requires cooperation. Especially issues like organized crime and corruption, as major security challenges of transitional post-conflict societies (not to speak about weak states) (Zakem *et al.*, 2017), proved to be a heavy burden for any country individually and given their transitional character, it became clear that cooperation has no sustainable alternative.

Therefore, it was interesting to see how the perception of our respondents of the bilateral cooperation in the field of policing looks like, depending on the country we were referring to. According to our findings, logically, the cooperation is very developed with the bordering countries, especially those that also have to deal with organized crime networks (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro) and other challenges that are affecting the stability of the abovementioned countries. On the other hand, there is an impression that the cooperation with those that are not

bordering countries (Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo) is less intense due to the fact that the nature of threats/issues is somewhat different.

Given the fact that the Western Balkans region is also known as 'Balkan route' and it presents the entering point in the European Union, one may conclude that cooperation between all the countries in the region is essential for the suppression of threats such as organized crime, illegal weapons trade or human trafficking (Getoš Kalac and Bezić, 2017). The everyday communication through INTERPOL or EUROPOL and exchange of information not only decreases the progress area for organized crime groups but it also improves capabilities of the police officers who deal with this matter.

Moreover, the competences of police officers are also an important factor for cooperation given the fact that by improving them, they contribute to the system as a whole. This was confirmed in our research given the fact that the majority of respondents highlighted that close cooperation in policing is sometimes even more visible and successful with neighbouring EU countries, like Italy, Hungary and Slovenia in particular, as well as with those that are not bordering Croatia. This is mainly due to two main reasons: the level of development and interoperability is much more comparable to the one of bordering EU countries than to the one of 'Eastern neighbours' and the fact that the EU membership (especially the admission to the Schengen regime that will follow) brings along a completely new context.

On the other hand, having in mind Croatia's experience in the reform processes, it was stressed by the majority of our interviewees that cooperation with Western Balkans countries during the last period, given the obvious differences in the level of development, is increasingly consisting in experience-sharing and mentoring of Croatian police experts. However, police cooperation, despite the differences, is perceived as positive and growing, as well as an appropriate tool for the combat against contemporary security challenges.

Besides the impact of external actors, the influence of internal politics on the policing is significant as well. It is generally considered to play a positive role in defining the guidelines, work framing and standardization, however the potential negative influences are also visible, particularly when political changes related to elections and redefinition of political goals are expected (Mandić, 2016). This creates even more uncertainty as far as the changes in neighbouring countries and their unpredictable impact on the further development of the regional cooperation are concerned. Nevertheless, the importance of political influences on policing is perceived as constantly declining within the past decades, which can show that after the initial phase of intensive stimulation of reforms and context setting, the work of police is becoming standardized and settled in the internal and external/regional environment and does not require such intensive inputs from the political stage anymore.

The regional cooperation is generally assessed as well – sometimes even exceptionally well – functioning, whereas a significant space for further

improvement is clearly visible. The areas of potential improvement are related mainly to the differentiated level of progress in transition and integration with the European structures of the individual states of the region (Klip, 2016). A big step forward has been observed after 2000, when both the formal cooperation within the framework of important international organisations, such as INTERPOL, EUROPOL or – frequently recalled in the interviews – Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association, as well as the less formal initiatives and personal contacts, were significantly intensified. The role of the non-formal contacts, facilitated by the absence of the language barrier in the region, is indicated very often by the respondents as one of the crucial elements of cooperation, as well as the mentoring and experience-sharing model of Croatian participation in the regional initiatives. Furthermore, according to our respondents, non-formal communication can also ensure fast response in the case of alarm announcement about where some felon is or where some illegal operation will take place. In such cases, fast reaction is essential and, given the fact that, according to our findings, the procedure of the Ministry of the Interior takes too long, makes personal contacts one of the main factors in obtaining a police job.

The normative fundaments for cooperation are considered to be satisfactory and the fact that all of the countries of the region have signed the most important international conventions facilitates the common work and makes it significantly better than 10 – 15 years ago. Although generally perceived as intensive and successful, the cooperation seems to be significantly more developed with the bordering countries considering the fact that they deal with the same issues. Exemplary, as previously mentioned, in its fight against organized crime, Croatia has mostly developed cooperation with Serbia, while border cooperation is more intensive with Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the abovementioned facts, one may conclude that cooperation among Western Balkans countries is closely connected with the field which it encompasses.⁶

While cooperation is generally seen as at least satisfying and promising, several areas are recalled in the interviews as crucial when the question of potential improvements is considered. For example, some countries in the region still have not passed information security laws which create serious difficulties in processes of cooperation with Croatia or other EU member states that are obliged to respect normative requirements. The development of the cooperation with the EU member states, and mainly with the ones bordering or located close to the Western Balkans region, is another issue frequently underlined by the interviewees and illustrated by the EU Danube Strategy initiative. However, as organized crime remains the crucial

⁶ Furthermore, there are some specific fields of policing, such as forensic science, in which cooperation is less developed, but the reason lies in fact that adoption of new laws allowed the use of evidence collected during investigation on the courts in other countries in the region, which had lessened the need for the direct cooperation in that particular area.

challenge for the region (Krasniqi, 2016), it is the operational cooperation in that field which is considered to be the fundamental one for the successful regional cooperation. The establishment of a common centre for fight against organized crime and terrorism, cooperation in the field of threats recognition, development of capacities and new tools – these are just a few ideas which appear at the interviews as potential solutions aimed at improving the efficiency of cooperation. Moreover, not only some specific fields of cooperation are perceived as not sufficiently covered by the cooperative actions, but the cooperation per se is regarded by some of the respondents as actions undertaken just on paper, whereas the practical dimension of police cooperation remains poor.

As already mentioned, personal contacts and the non-formal dimension of cooperation seem to be one of the key elements of successful cooperation and should be developed intensively, as it was the case within the framework of SEPICA, for example. This relates *inter alia* to ‘the gentle nature’ of the issues that police officers deal with, as well as the huge importance of trust in the field of homeland security. However, the ability to network and develop contacts with colleagues from the other countries is not a natural feature of all people and therefore the selection of officers responsible for the contacts should be processed very carefully. Personal contacts make cooperation faster, easier and more effective; however, it should not be forgotten that officers still remain servants of their country and should act in the national interest and not in his/her personal one. Another problem that results from the great importance of personal contacts is the lack of continuity usually assigned to the bureaucratic structure.

Research shows that there is a very positive perception of the future development of regional cooperation in the field of policing and the mutual support among the Western Balkans countries is expected to be more intense and more effective. The number of already signed bi- and multilateral agreements equips the states with a broad set of instruments, of which just some are used by now, and which allows the cooperation not only to become more intensive, but also to be wider and deeper. Both the deepening and widening should spread from the operative cooperation, over the tactical one to the level of ideas and approaches shared by the regional community. The high level politics should be involved and the cooperation is expected to be organized thematically and be developed by regional research teams and regional centres assigned to fight against specific issues.

While it is evident that these empirical findings prove the fact that regional security co-operation is progressively advancing and is also affirmatively perceived by the interviewed professionals from the Croatian MoI and police, we could not omit noticing the fact that we were not able to obtain empiric evidence for the development of a very important element of the security community theoretical concept and that is the so-called ‘we-ness feeling’ – the generalised common identity and loyalty. Namely, while the large majority of respondents expressed positive attitude towards the upgraded security co-operation in the region, almost all of them

clearly stated that they identify themselves and feel more loyal to the wider transatlantic community and can envisage the ‘we-ness’ feeling with the rest of the region only within that wider framework, once Western Balkans countries meet the criteria and join ‘the club’. Obviously, it is highly unlikely that substantial changes are going to take place in that regard and therefore, it is clear that it would be very difficult to find empirical evidence for the tested theoretical concept in the forthcoming period, not to speak about the present.

Conclusions

Stability proved to be the greatest challenge for the region during recent two decades or so. The painful process of reforms, mainly stimulated from abroad, has been under way for a significant amount of time. Progress in some areas is difficult to question – democratisation, market reforms, respect for human and minority rights and so on. However, what still remains to be seen is whether the region has managed to move from being a conflict zone in the ‘90s to one that meets the theoretical criteria for ‘a security community’.

Of course, having put the research framework this way does not necessarily mean that we assume the existence or inexistence of security community in the region. On the other hand, we strongly believe that the theoretical framework and empirical methods chosen would be an appropriate way to test it and hence contribute to the overall security-related research in this part of Europe.

Given the fact that it is highly unlikely to imagine that a single study comparable to this would be able to cover all aspects of security community in any region, we decided to focus our research on police as a profession and an epistemic community in Croatia and the way it does, or does not, contribute to the creation of security community in regional terms.

So, despite the visible limits of this study and its focus on police as only one profession within the security sector of a single country, the methodological framework and, in particular, the available empirical methods lead to the conclusion that our research will be more than relevant for regional security studies. Moreover, it would contribute to the understanding of on-going processes in the region that would define its ‘shape’ in the forthcoming period and determine its future stability.

According to our findings, in general, the regional co-operation in the field of policing seems to be improving noticeably and successfully moving away from the patterns of work during the ‘90s when conflict dominated the context. Obviously, the times when the security of one country in the region is defined against the threat of the other is in ‘the rear-view mirror’, while political changes, EU and NATO accession processes and detection of security threats in common make police co-operation self-understandable.

This research has shown that there is a perception that new political elites have brought a different regional environment in which various types of co-operation

(police co-operation included) are more likely to happen, while the benefits that represent a visible consequence of it stimulate investing more energy into different frameworks of regional co-operation. Furthermore, the EU and NATO accession processes and the conditionality they carry along contribute significantly to the intensification of co-operation, while the development of international relations and the new threats that they bring to the region and which are common for countries in this part of Europe (corruption and organised crime in the countries in transition) add to the need for co-operation significantly. Personal contacts and the informal dimension of cooperation, derived from frequent regional events and forums of communication, coupled with the absence of language barrier, significantly improve the overall regional cooperation and understanding, having a direct impact on the efficiency of police at national levels.

Having taken all aforementioned facts into account, one may conclude that police cooperation within the region is intensifying and getting new dimensions. However, when testing the findings against the theoretical framework of security communities, one would obviously find it very difficult to detect all the indicators that would enable him/her to argue on the existence of security community in the Western Balkans, at least from the perspective of Croatian police. First of all, while one would obviously find mutual relevance of units, compatibility of values and mutual responsiveness, researchers could not omit noticing that generalized common identity and loyalty is obviously lacking. Namely, the issue of identity and self-perception, according to the responses of our interviewees, is rarely related to Western Balkans and, while being mostly driven by the process of Europeanization within the framework of EU and NATO accession, it seems to be corresponding more with these frameworks. This was supported, in practical terms, mainly by the argument regarding the difference in the pace of reforms, track and development of the police profession between Croatia, on the one hand, and the countries from the region, on the other.

Furthermore, when speaking about theoretical reference, that is the core area of one or few political units which are stronger, more highly developed and, under some significant aspects, more advanced and attractive than the rest, it is obvious that something like this, from a Croatian perspective, does not exist in the region. Moreover, 'the centre to look into' would be Brussels and, given the fact that Croatia is the most developed country, it may play that role for the other states in the region.

The somewhat distinct self-perception and lack of the we-ness feeling for the region, mainly based on the evident difference in development, from the perspective of our focus group, do not necessarily mean that regional cooperation is less relevant and less important for Croatia than for the others. Namely, Croatian welfare depends significantly on the stability of Western Balkan countries and therefore, practices related to self-restraint that help constitute dependable expectations of peaceful change remain to be of utmost importance while the we-ness feeling for the countries

in the region can be envisaged only within the future common framework of EU and NATO membership.

On the other hand, while police represents a very important pillar of security services in any given country, and in particular region, it operates within the legal framework defined by political elites and its professional influence on decision making procedures at the state level should not be overestimated. In that sense, there is limited empiric proof of the role of police as a very influential profession, or even an epistemic community, that significantly contributes to the formation of security community within the region.

This, of course, does not question the fact that police remains an important institution within the security sector of any country in the region and that cooperation remains crucial for its long term stability. Moreover, the progress in the reform processes of all countries in the region will help them meet the same standards of democratic governance and functionality and will hopefully contribute to the concept of we-ness in the wider framework of the transatlantic community.

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