

Scandals Shake Croatian Army

Author: [Drago Hedl](#)

Hardly a day passes in Croatia without a new scandal besmirching the once untouchable armed forces.

Croatia has been stunned by recent revelations implicating the armed forces in corruption, drug trafficking, sexual abuse and incompetence.

First came reports that officers in the defence ministry and the army's general staff had for years enjoyed unfettered access to nearly 2000 "official" cars, including 112 luxury vehicles. Many had been stolen in Bosnia or "requisitioned" from Croatian Serbs during the war.

But this was the tip of the iceberg. During the ten year reign of late President, Franjo Tudjman, some opposition politicians had been bold enough to suggest members of the armed forces and defence ministry were involved in organised crime, including drug-trafficking.

All investigations were blocked, however, while Tudjman's close associate, Gojko Susak, remained at the helm in the defence ministry. The army was in effect a state within a state - any criticism was tantamount to treason, an attack on the army's combat readiness.

But in late June this year, ten senior officers and officials were charged with defrauding the defence ministry of 14 million kuna (\$1.3 million). Those charged included three generals - Ljubo Cesic, Matko Kakariga and Vladimir Zagorec. Then, on July 12, a further 15 high-ranking army officers were charged with misappropriating defence ministry funds.

When the new government of Prime Minister, Ivica Racan, looked more closely into defence ministry documents, however, the missing \$1.3 million amounted to a mere trifle.

The Tudjman government, for example, had purchased an S-300 rocket system from the Ukraine for \$230 million. The system, which includes 24 rockets, two launching pads, a tower, an antenna and a crane, was proudly displayed at a large military parade through Zagreb in 1995. But the control console and radar, vital to the system's operation, were missing.

The deal, arranged by German businessman Josef Rothaichner, envisaged Croatia paying through the lease of an airport on the island of Krk and two tourist hotel companies, which owned around ten hotels.

It appears, however, the deal was never closed and now the Croatian government is stuck with paying for a useless rocket system, which is now gathering dust in a warehouse outside Knin.

Ivica Pancic, the minister charged with taking care of Croatia's war veterans, has unearthed a large number of frauds involving disabled veterans, mostly among high-ranking officers. By presenting false medical documents the veterans have secured the highest category of disability allowances, including privileges such as large discounts on foreign cars.

The new Minister of Defence, Jozo Rados, has been criticised by the public and President, Stipe Mesic, for the slow pace of his crackdown on corruption. But his caution has not been without reason - the scale of

the problem and the seniority of those implicated presented serious difficulties, especially if the stability of the new government is to be preserved at the same time.

The poor conditions endured by regular soldiers were highlighted earlier in July when 42 young troops deserted their unit stationed in Pula. The deserters said they had been maltreated by officers at the barracks. Some claimed they had been sexually assaulted. Others spoke of widespread drug use. An investigation into the allegations has revealed some of the junior officers may have been supplying the soldiers with narcotics.

The government insists it plans to thoroughly root out corruption and crime from Croatia's armed forces. While Croatia is keen to join NATO's Partnership for Peace, it is clear that without a thorough clean-out of the country's military admission will remain a pipe dream.

During the ten years of Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union, the army was moulded into the party's personal fighting force, with its commanders hand-picked for their loyalty to the government. The painstaking unravelling of that process has only just begun.

Drago Hedl is a regular IWPR contributor

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