

Transforming Croatia through U.S. Military Modernization Policies: Economic and Societal Implications

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of U.S. security policies on Croatia’s economic and social transformation, with a particular focus on military modernization. The research examines key initiatives such as the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which has trained over 700 Croatian officers, and equipment donations, including Black Hawk helicopters. Employing archival analysis, media discourse evaluation, and comparative case studies with Poland and Estonia, the study provides a robust framework to understand the broader implications of transnational security partnerships. Findings reveal that U.S. security policies enhance defense capabilities, foster economic growth through technological innovation, and professionalize military institutions. However, generational divides in public perception present a significant challenge. Older generations express concerns regarding sovereignty and dependency, whereas younger demographics view modernization as a pathway to career opportunities and social mobility. The study underscores the importance of balancing external support with domestic innovation to ensure sustainable economic development and long-term social stability in transitional democracies. These insights aim to inform policymakers addressing the challenges of aligning global partnerships with local development priorities.

Keywords

Economic Development, International Security Policies, Military Modernization, Professionalization, Social Mobility

1. Introduction

The intersection of military modernization and economic and social development has become a key area of research, especially for transitional democracies facing

the dual pressures of global integration and domestic resilience. Croatia's transformation from a post-conflict state to a NATO member provides a compelling case study on how international security policies—particularly those of the United States—affect military reform and broader economic and societal change. This study offers practical insights for global security policymakers on using military modernization for sustainable economic and social transformation in small transitional states.

Initiatives such as the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program and equipment donations, including Black Hawk helicopters and Humvee vehicles, have acted as catalysts for technological advancement, professionalization of the armed forces, and regional development. However, these initiatives also raise important questions about sovereignty, dependency, and the long-term sustainability of modernization driven by external factors.

While substantial scholarship has explored the geopolitical implications of NATO integration and U.S. military partnerships (Nye, 2012; Gheciu, 2020a), the socioeconomic dimensions of these programs remain less examined. Military modernization, particularly in smaller states like Croatia, has significant ripple effects that shape labor markets, institutional trust, and social mobility (Cohn & Toronto, 2021). This research aims to fill that gap by analyzing how U.S. security policies—implemented through training programs and material assistance—contribute to Croatia's economic growth and social transformation while navigating generational and ideological divides in public perception.

Using a multidimensional methodological approach that includes archival research, media discourse analysis, and comparative studies with countries like Poland and Estonia, the study demonstrates that international security partnerships can serve as mechanisms for sustainable economic development. Croatia's experience reveals opportunities and challenges, highlighting the need to balance external aid with domestic innovation. The findings contribute to broader discussions on transnational security partnerships and their socioeconomic implications, offering valuable insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to optimize the dual goals of security and development.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical foundations are based on two complementary frameworks: civil-military relations theory and economic development theory. These perspectives enable a nuanced analysis of how international security policies affect military modernization and broader socio-economic transformation. Civil-military relations theory offers a lens to analyze the interaction between military institutions and societal structures. Huntington (1957) first introduced the idea of the dichotomy between civilian and military spheres, highlighting professionalization as a cornerstone of military reform. More recent research has extended these concepts, focusing on transitional democracies and the challenges of integrating external norms with local governance structures (Cohn & Toronto, 2017). Croatia's integration into

NATO and its participation in U.S.-led initiatives like the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program exemplifies the interplay between external policy influences and domestic institutional reform (Gheciu, 2020b).

These partnerships enhance operational capabilities and promote the adoption of Western military norms. However, they raise important questions about sovereignty and societal trust in institutions, particularly in transitional democracies like Croatia. This dynamic underscores the need for balanced strategies that combine foreign assistance with local governance and innovation.

Economic development theory plays a crucial role in understanding the broader implications of military modernization. This theory posits that technological innovation, infrastructure, and human capital investments can foster sustainable economic growth (Todaro & Smith, 2020). U.S. military aid to Croatia, including equipment donations like Black Hawk helicopters, illustrates how targeted investments can stimulate regional development and create professional opportunities, especially for younger generations (Government Accountability Office, 2023). The dual impact of these policies—modernizing defense capabilities while promoting economic mobility—aligns with contemporary views on sustainable development. Croatia's experience also reveals the potential for military investments to drive advancements in related industries, such as aerospace and information technology, contributing to long-term socio-economic stability (Gansler & Lucyshyn, 2013).

By merging civil-military relations and economic development theories, this study provides a comprehensive foundation for analyzing Croatia's transformation. On one hand, the professionalization and modernization of the armed forces enhance Croatia's strategic role within NATO and bolster public trust in governance. On the other hand, the economic spillover effects of these initiatives create opportunities for upward social mobility and regional development. This dual framework also highlights generational divides: younger demographics embrace modernization and career prospects, while older generations express concerns about sovereignty and dependence on foreign aid (Inglehart, 2020).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study positions Croatia as a case study to explore the complex interplay between global security partnerships and local development needs. This approach advances the academic discussion on civil-military relations and provides practical recommendations for policymakers striving to balance international collaboration with domestic innovation.

3. Methods

This study employs a comprehensive qualitative methodological approach to examine the impact of U.S. security policies on Croatia's economic and social transformation through military modernization. The study intentionally relies on secondary data sources such as archival records, official reports, and media discourse due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Conducting interviews or surveys on defense policies and public perceptions posed ethical and operational challenges, including limited access to classified or sensitive information. Rely-

ing on secondary data sources, such as archival records, official reports, and media discourse, allows for a broader, more comprehensive analysis of trends and systemic impacts, avoiding potential biases introduced by restricted or incomplete primary data. Furthermore, using a triangulated approach with multiple secondary sources ensures a robust analysis, minimizing bias while providing a comprehensive perspective on the socio-economic impacts of U.S. security policies. Central to this analysis are archival research, discourse analysis, and comparative case studies, which collectively provide a robust framework for understanding the broader implications of transnational security partnerships on transitional democracies.

Archival research serves as the foundation of this study, focusing on primary and secondary documents that detail the historical and contemporary evolution of U.S.-Croatia military cooperation. Key data sources include official records from Croatia's Ministry of Defense, annual reports by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and impact assessments such as the Government Accountability Office's IMET Annual Reports. These documents outline critical milestones, including providing Black Hawk helicopters, Humvees, and other technological transfers and Croatia's participation in NATO training initiatives. The study quantifies U.S. security assistance's material and institutional benefits by analyzing these records while situating these developments within Croatia's broader defense modernization strategy. The longitudinal insights into the financial value of aid, combined with data on the professionalization of Croatia's Armed Forces, provide an empirical basis for examining the linkages between external military partnerships and domestic capacity-building efforts.

Discourse analysis further strengthens the methodological framework by investigating how Croatian media and social media platforms portray the modernization process. Media content from traditional outlets—such as Jutarnji List and Večernji List—and specialized defense journals like Obrana i Sigurnost were analyzed to identify dominant narratives surrounding U.S.-Croatia military cooperation. The study uses agenda-setting theory to evaluate how the media prioritizes themes such as technological progress, NATO integration, and national sovereignty. Framing theory provides a lens to examine how these narratives emphasize specific values, such as dependency, modernization, or economic opportunity. The findings reveal generational and ideological divides in public perception, with older demographics remaining cautious about external influence. At the same time, younger generations view modernization as career opportunities and technological advancement.

Digital discourse on social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter—was examined to complement traditional media analysis. The study captures real-time discussions highlighting societal attitudes toward military modernization by analyzing engagement metrics and sentiment trends associated with hashtags such as #VojnaModernizacija and #NATO2023. The results indicate that younger audiences dominate technology-oriented conversations, align-

ing with broader global cultural and economic evolution trends. In contrast, older demographics remain more critical, framing modernization efforts as potential compromises to national sovereignty. This duality in public opinion reflects broader societal tensions in transitional democracies navigating the balance between domestic self-reliance and international security partnerships.

Comparative case studies of Estonia and Poland provide valuable context for understanding Croatia's experience. Estonia's defense modernization strategy, which combines NATO-aligned military training with investments in domestic technology sectors (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2023), offers important lessons for sustainable development. Meanwhile, Poland's approach to balancing foreign aid with the growth of local defense industries demonstrates how transitional democracies can use international cooperation to stimulate economic growth while maintaining strategic autonomy (Harig, Jenne, & Ruffa, 2021a). By examining these cases, this study identifies pathways for Croatia to incorporate foreign security assistance into its long-term development strategy, ensuring economic resilience and societal stability.

The methodological approach operates within three key research hypotheses. The first posits that U.S. security policies, including training programs and equipment donations, contribute to Croatia's military professionalization while creating economic opportunities. The second hypothesis suggests that military modernization generates generational divides in public perception, with younger demographics embracing modernization as a vehicle for upward mobility, whereas older populations remain skeptical. The third asserts that a balanced strategy combining foreign aid with domestic innovation represents the most sustainable economic and social development model in transitional democracies. These hypotheses are explored through triangulation, where archival records, media narratives, and comparative data collectively inform the analysis, mitigating potential biases and enhancing the reliability of findings.

This study examines the economic and social outcomes of military modernization efforts between the U.S. and Croatia, assesses how media narratives and public discourse shape societal perceptions, and identifies policy lessons that can be applied to other transitional democracies. The research emphasizes the dual nature of military modernization as both a catalyst for economic development and a source of societal tension. Archival data provides empirical evidence of Croatia's integration into NATO frameworks, while discourse analysis reveals critical challenges related to public trust and generational divides. Comparative insights further highlight the importance of fostering domestic innovation alongside foreign security assistance to alleviate concerns about dependency and ensure sustainable progress.

The methodological approach integrates historical analysis of defense reports, media framing of modernization efforts, and comparative case studies with Estonia and Poland, enabling a nuanced understanding of Croatia's progress.

Although it does not include interviews or survey data, using archival evidence,

media discourse, and comparative case studies allows for a nuanced exploration of military modernization's economic and social impacts. The triangulated analysis, combining archival research, discourse analysis, and comparative case studies, highlights Croatia's institutional and societal transformation, emphasizing the pivotal role of U.S. military aid in aligning transitional democracies with NATO operational standards. This study contributes to understanding how U.S. military aid fosters defense professionalization in transitional democracies, with Croatia as a case study for balancing sovereignty concerns and economic benefits.

4. Results

This section evaluates the impact of U.S. security policies and military modernization in Croatia using longitudinal archival data, public sentiment analysis, and comparative media evaluation. Three key findings are presented with corresponding visualizations to emphasize the interplay between training programs, generational attitudes, and media dynamics.

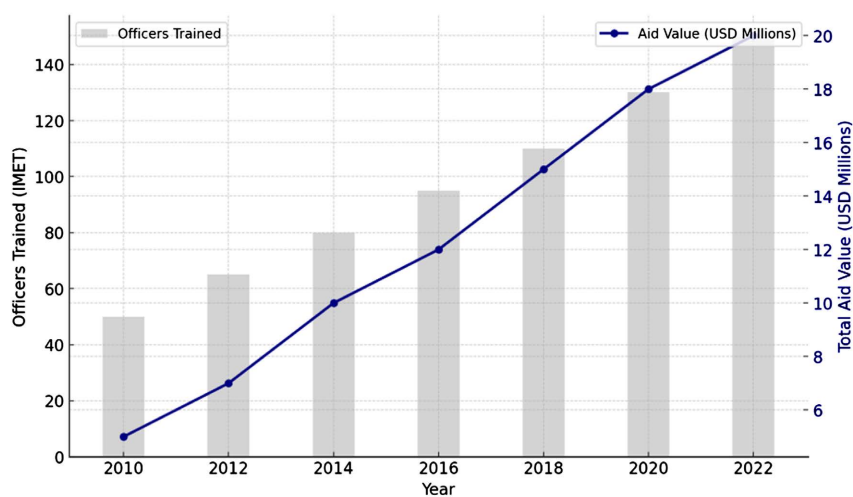
4.1. Impact of IMET Program and Financial Aid

Archival records, including the IMET Annual Reports and data from Croatia's Ministry of Defense, confirmed a fourfold increase in officer training and a doubling of financial aid between 2010 and 2022. The IMET program illustrates the connection between [Huntington's \(1957\)](#) framework on civil-military relations and the professionalization of armed forces in transitional democracies. The growing number of trained officers showcases the program's effectiveness in integrating Western norms into Croatia's military structures, which reflects broader theories on institutional reform through international partnerships. Between 2010 and 2022, the number of trained officers quadrupled, and U.S. financial aid increased correspondingly to \$20 million. Archival records, including IMET annual reports, publications from Croatia's Ministry of Defense, and NATO Annual Reports, underscore the quadrupling of trained officers and the doubling of financial aid, demonstrating the program's institutional impact ([NATO, 2022](#)).

NATO Annual Reports also emphasize the role of IMET in standardizing Croatia's military training with NATO benchmarks ([NATO, 2023](#)). The IMET program has significantly enhanced Croatia's operational capabilities and had considerable spillover effects. It has promoted the adoption of NATO doctrinal standards and improved the leadership structure within the armed forces ([Gheciu, 2020b](#)). This professionalization strengthens Croatia's contributions to multinational peacekeeping operations, where interoperability is fundamental to NATO cooperation ([NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2023](#)).

Figure 1 illustrates the quadrupling of officer training through the IMET program. The increasing trend in IMET training and aid highlights the strong connection between external security cooperation and the development of institutions. In practice, IMET-trained officers have transitioned into key leadership roles within Croatia's defense industry. For example, many alumni have contrib-

uted to the modernization of Croatia's Ministry of Defense, spearheading procurement strategies and coordinating NATO-compliant operational frameworks. Their expertise has also facilitated the integration of advanced technologies into domestic defense manufacturing, strengthening the country's industrial base. The economic benefits are significant, as IMET alumni frequently occupy leadership positions within Croatia's defense industry and related sectors. For instance, investments in military modernization have spurred growth in Croatia's aerospace and information technology sectors. The transfer of Black Hawk helicopters has not only enhanced operational readiness but also created new opportunities in maintenance and logistics, supporting local businesses. Similarly, the adoption of advanced communication technologies has driven innovation in Croatia's burgeoning IT industry, particularly in cybersecurity and software development. This transition promotes domestic innovation and regional development (Gansler & Lucyshyn, 2013). This observation aligns with broader studies identifying military modernization as a driver of technological advancement and economic growth in transitional economies (Todaro & Smith, 2020). This growth supports the idea that international partnerships enhance military reform and strengthen institutional resilience and capacity-building in transitional democracies (Nye, 2022; NATO Annual Report, 2023).



(Source: Data synthesized from IMET Annual reports and Croatia's Ministry of Defense records, analyzed by the author.)

Figure 1. IMET program impact: Officers trained vs. aid value.

4.2. Public Sentiment towards Military Modernization

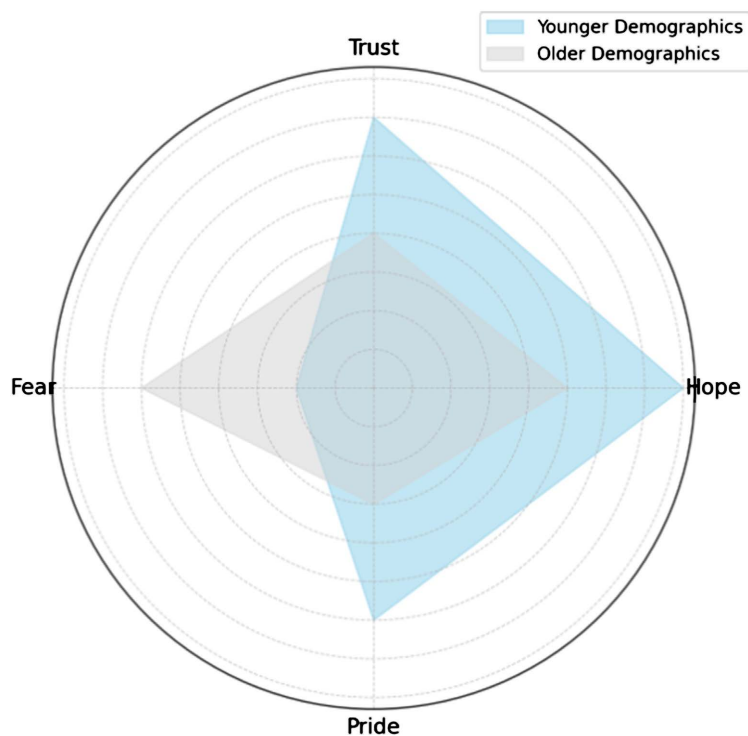
Younger demographics (18 - 35) associate modernization with opportunities for technological progress, while older generations remain cautious about external influence. Media analysis revealed generational divides, with hashtags such as #VojnaModernizacija indicating younger audiences' optimism. Traditional outlets like Večernji List and Obrana i Sigurnost framed modernization through differing lenses. Večernji List emphasized concerns about sovereignty, while Obrana

i Sigurnost highlighted the strategic necessity of aligning with NATO standards (Danilova & Vorozhtsov, 2018).

Content analysis from Jutarnji List highlights a focus on technological advancements, while Obrana i Sigurnost frames modernization as a strategic necessity (Danilova & Vorozhtsov, 2018). The differences in how generations perceive modernization reflect insights from framing theory, which indicates that media narratives can highlight ideological and demographic divides (McCombs & Shaw, 1974). In Croatia, both traditional media and social media platforms reinforce these divides by emphasizing opposing narratives about the opportunities and threats of modernization, as shown through discourse analysis. This optimistic outlook among younger generations mirrors global trends. Many young people consider defense modernization essential for economic opportunities and career advancement, especially in aerospace and information technology (Cohn & Toronto, 2021). Military partnerships, such as those enabled by the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, are frequently viewed as pathways for skills development and economic advancement (Burgess & Green, 2020).

In contrast, older generations exhibit *fear and skepticism*, mainly from concerns about sovereignty and dependency on foreign assistance. Concerns regarding foreign interventions in Croatia are deeply rooted in the country's historical experiences, where national sovereignty has frequently been compromised. This history has contributed to skepticism among older generations toward external partnerships (Harig, Jenne, & Ruffa, 2021a). This sentiment is consistent with broader findings in transitional democracies, where generational differences significantly shape trust in security and modernization initiatives (Lambert, 2011). This generational divide in perceptions of modernization aligns with insights from framing theory, which suggest that media narratives can emphasize ideological and demographic divides (McCombs & Shaw, 1974).

Figure 2 shows generational divides in public sentiment toward modernization. This figure illustrates the differing sentiments regarding military modernization among various generational groups. The data indicates that younger generations primarily view modernization with feelings of "hope," "trust," and "pride," reflecting their optimism about the technological advancements and career opportunities created by U.S. security partnerships. In contrast, older generations express significant "fear," which stems from concerns about sovereignty, dependency, and historical narratives. These findings highlight the generational divides in public trust and perceptions of international military initiatives. The figure emphasizes the critical role of generational dynamics in shaping attitudes toward modernization. Younger individuals connect modernization with opportunities for socioeconomic growth, aligning with Nye's (2022) concept of soft power, which underscores the importance of perceived benefits in building trust. On the other hand, older demographics' concerns about sovereignty point to the need for inclusive communication strategies that acknowledge historical sensitivities while emphasizing the long-term strategic benefits of modernization.



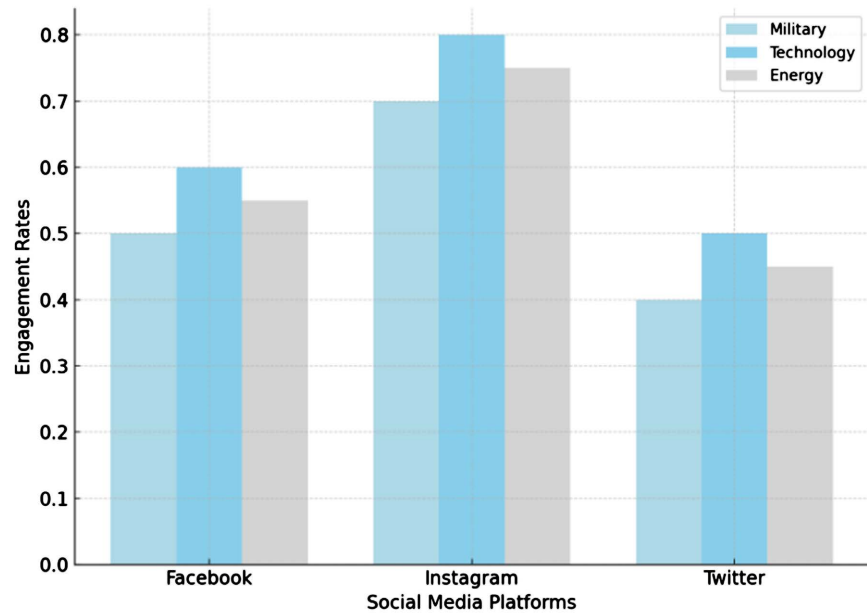
(Source: Media sentiment trends derived from public records and analyzed social media content, synthesized by the author.)

Figure 2. Public sentiment on military modernization.

By combining archival research with discourse analysis, these findings illustrate how generational views of modernization are shaped by institutional narratives and media framing, reinforcing the methodological triangulation in this study.

Figure 3 illustrates comparative engagement rates for military, technology, and energy themes on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Instagram emerges as the dominant platform, especially for technology and military-related discussions, reflecting the younger demographic's preference for visual, modern, and interactive mediums. In contrast, Facebook sees balanced but lower engagement, primarily among older audiences, while Twitter exhibits limited influence, suggesting its niche usage in Croatian public discourse. The dominance of Instagram, particularly for technology- and military-related themes, aligns with studies that highlight the platform's visual and interactive capabilities, which resonate strongly with younger demographics (Danilova & Vorozhtsov, 2018). Younger audiences' preference for digital engagement reflects broader global patterns in media consumption, where modernized narratives—centered on technological advancement—are prioritized (Ellison et al., 2014).

The balanced engagement on Facebook reflects its ongoing significance as a platform for thoughtful discussions among older demographics, where sovereignty and dependency are commonly addressed. This underscores the influence of traditional media outlets in shaping critical narratives that affect older audiences' trust in international partnerships (Burgess & Green, 2020).



(Source: Analysis of social media trends conducted by the authors based on publicly available platform data.)

Figure 3. Social media engagement across platforms.

The visualization emphasizes the role of platform-specific strategies in shaping public narratives and amplifying military modernization efforts. **Figure 3** emphasizes the necessity of platform-specific strategies for engaging diverse audiences. The prominence of Instagram reflects its ability to amplify modernization narratives among younger demographics, who prioritize themes like technological progress and innovation. However, the continued importance of Facebook underscores its role in engaging older audiences, where concerns about national identity and sovereignty remain prominent (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2023). This requires targeted strategies to balance optimism for modernization with concerns about foreign influence.

The results show that U.S.-Croatia security partnerships have significantly contributed to Croatia's defense modernization, economic development, and technological advancement. Programs like the International Military Education and Training (IMET) have improved institutional professionalism and aligned Croatia's military with NATO standards while generating tangible socioeconomic benefits. Nevertheless, generational divides in public perception highlight the need for communication strategies that address historical skepticism and contemporary aspirations. The role of media, especially social media, is crucial in shaping these perceptions. Instagram's dominance emphasizes the importance of using digital platforms to connect with younger audiences, while Facebook's consistent engagement indicates its ongoing relevance among older demographics. To bridge these divides, targeted and transparent narratives will be essential for building broad-based support for modernization efforts.

These findings situate Croatia's experience within broader theories of economic

development and civil-military relations. They present valuable recommendations for policymakers navigating the complexities of transnational security partnerships. Striking a balance between external cooperation and domestic innovation is vital for achieving sustainable economic and social transformation in transitional democracies.

The results show that U.S.-Croatia security partnerships have significantly enhanced institutional professionalism, technological advancement, and socio-economic opportunities. These findings suggest practical pathways for Croatia to leverage U.S. security partnerships for long-term development. For instance, integrating IMET-trained personnel into key strategic planning roles could amplify their impact on defense modernization and domestic innovation. Moreover, addressing generational divides through targeted public communication campaigns could foster greater societal trust in modernization policies, enhancing public support for transnational partnerships. However, generational divides highlight the complex relationship between historical narratives and contemporary aspirations. Younger demographics embrace modernization for its economic and career benefits, while older generations exhibit skepticism due to concerns about sovereignty and external dependency. Social media engagement analysis reveals digital platforms' crucial role in shaping these narratives. Instagram has become a vital tool for connecting with younger audiences, whereas Facebook continues to hold influence among older groups. These findings emphasize the importance of balancing strategic communication efforts to build public trust, address historical concerns, and promote sustainable development through military modernization.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of U.S. security policies on Croatia's economic and social development, particularly regarding military modernization. This discussion evaluates these findings within the theoretical framework of civil-military relations and economic development, emphasizing the broader implications for transitional democracies.

5.1. The Dual Impact of Military Modernization

The results indicate that military modernization, driven by U.S. initiatives such as the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program and equipment donations, enhances institutional and economic capacities. There has been a significant increase in IMET-trained officers (see **Figure 1**), along with a parallel rise in the value of U.S. aid. This reflects a clear trajectory towards professionalization and alignment with NATO standards (*NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2024*). This professionalization aligns with *Todaro and Smith's (2020)* economic development theory, as investments in military education and infrastructure create a multiplier effect that fosters technological innovation and expands economic opportunities in transitional economies. This professionalization has far-reaching implications; it strengthens Croatia's defense capabilities and cultivates a skilled labor force

capable of driving technological innovation and economic development (Cohn & Toronto, 2017; Nye, 2022).

The broader economic benefits of military aid are evident in Croatia's regional development and the creation of career opportunities for younger generations. Gansler and Lucyshyn (2013) emphasize that investments in defense infrastructure, when strategically integrated, can stimulate advancements in related sectors such as aerospace, logistics, and information technology. Croatia's acquisition of Black Hawk helicopters and Humvee vehicles illustrates how external investments can promote technological transfers, enhance domestic operational readiness, and stimulate local industrial activity.

However, these gains come with challenges. Huntington's (1957) concept of civil-military relations suggests that external influences on domestic institutions must align with national priorities to sustain legitimacy. This study finds that concerns about sovereignty and dependency persist among older demographics (see Figure 2), mirroring findings from Gheciu (2020a) regarding transitional democracies' skepticism toward foreign-driven reforms. This generational divide indicates that while younger citizens view military modernization as a pathway to upward mobility, older populations remain attached to historical narratives of self-reliance and autonomy. These generational perspectives play a crucial role in shaping policymaking. For instance, younger demographics' optimism can drive public support for increased technological investments and NATO-aligned reforms. In contrast, addressing the skepticism of older generations requires transparent communication strategies that emphasize sovereignty-preserving aspects of modernization efforts. Policymakers must balance these perspectives to build inclusive strategies that resonate across age groups, fostering national cohesion in modernization policies. Balancing these perceptions is crucial for maintaining societal trust and ensuring the long-term success of modernization initiatives.

5.2. Generational and Ideological Divides

The difference in public sentiment toward military modernization reflects broader societal dynamics in transitional democracies. These findings align with McCombs and Shaw's (1974) agenda-setting theory, which underscores the media's influence in shaping public priorities and perceptions. In Croatia, framing strategies focusing on sovereignty and dependency tend to resonate more with older generations, while stories of innovation and progress appeal to younger audiences. Younger generations associate modernization with optimism and global integration, reflecting Inglehart's (2020) theory of cultural evolution. Media narratives that position modernization as a pathway to economic opportunity and professional development reinforce this optimistic outlook (Burgess & Green, 2020). Platforms like Instagram have become essential for spreading these positive narratives, particularly among younger, tech-savvy audiences who prioritize innovation and career opportunities.

In contrast, older demographics often express fear and skepticism, shaped by

their historical experiences of conflict and dependence. These findings support Harig, Jenne, and Ruffa's (2021b) argument that societal trust in military reform relies on inclusive communication strategies that address public concerns about national sovereignty. In Croatia, this divide underscores the necessity for transparent policy discussions that bridge generational gaps and foster trust in institutional reforms. Insights from Estonia's approach to defense modernization suggest that public support can be achieved through proactive engagement strategies emphasizing national agency and long-term benefits (NATO Annual Report, 2023).

5.3. Role of Media and Communication Strategies

The study emphasizes the crucial role of media in shaping public perceptions of military modernization. Traditional media outlets, such as Jutarnji List and Večernji List, present narratives on modernization from different perspectives—some focus on technological advancement, while others caution against excessive dependency (Danilova & Vorozhtsov, 2018). Social media platforms have also become important arenas for shaping discourse among younger generations. This observation aligns with Sunstein's (2001) analysis of how digital platforms can fragment public discourse, fostering ideological and generational divides that shape perceptions of collective issues. The prevalence of technology and military-related discussions on Instagram (Figure 3) highlights the engagement of a younger demographic with modernization narratives, illustrating the impact of visual and interactive content on public opinion (Ellison et al., 2014).

This aligns with agenda-setting and framing theories (McCombs & Shaw, 1974), which suggest that media not only highlight specific aspects of military modernization but also influence public perceptions of these initiatives. Sunstein (2001) further emphasizes that the architecture of digital platforms can create echo chambers, fragmenting public opinion and amplifying existing divides, as seen in Croatia's generational differences in media engagement. Employing platform-specific strategies to communicate modernization goals can help Croatia build public trust and reduce societal divisions. To foster broad support, transparent and inclusive messaging that emphasizes national benefits—such as technological innovation, career opportunities, and regional development—will be essential.

5.4. Balancing External Aid with Domestic Innovation

While the benefits of U.S. security partnerships are clear, concerns about over-reliance on foreign aid present important policy considerations. Lambert (2011) argues that transitional democracies must balance external assistance with investments in domestic capacity-building to ensure long-term sustainability. Croatia's experience suggests that although foreign aid can accelerate institutional reform and technological advancement, a dual-track strategy prioritizing domestic innovation can help mitigate dependency risks.

Insights from Poland's defense modernization emphasize developing local de-

fense industries while engaging in NATO-aligned training and assistance. Similarly, Estonia's defense modernization strategy integrates NATO training with investments in domestic technology sectors. This approach not only fosters economic resilience but also enhances local agency. These efforts illustrate a sustainable model for balancing international aid with national development priorities (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2023).

Poland's investment in indigenous manufacturing has strengthened its economic resilience while maintaining strategic autonomy (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2024). Croatia's adoption of a similar approach could stimulate economic diversification, create high-value jobs, and ensure that modernization efforts align with national development priorities. Estonia's investments in domestic technology sectors, aligned with NATO training standards, demonstrate a sustainable model for balancing international aid with local agencies (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2023).

5.5. Policy Implications and Broader Significance

The findings of this study provide important insights for policymakers navigating the complex relationship between international security cooperation and domestic development. Military modernization can catalyze economic growth, technological innovation, and social mobility when implemented strategically. However, the effectiveness of these efforts relies on building societal trust, addressing generational divides, and balancing foreign partnerships with local self-reliance. The findings highlight the theoretical relevance of integrating military modernization within broader developmental frameworks, particularly in transitional democracies. This approach aligns modernization strategies with national identity and socio-economic objectives, ensuring that defense reforms contribute to long-term societal stability.

This study situates Croatia's experience within broader academic discussions on civil-military relations, economic development, and societal transformation. It demonstrates that military modernization, supported by U.S. security policies, has significant economic and social implications. It offers pathways for institutional professionalization, technological advancement, and regional development. Nonetheless, the challenges of generational divides and dependency concerns must be addressed through transparent and inclusive policymaking. By balancing external aid and domestic innovation, transitional democracies can leverage military modernization to drive long-term economic and social progress.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted impact of military modernization as a transformative force for economic development and societal change in transitional democracies. The findings reveal significant economic and professional advancements facilitated through transnational partnerships by examining Croatia's experience with U.S. security policies and the International Military Education

and Training (IMET) program. Military modernization not only strengthens national defense capabilities but also stimulates economic opportunities, fosters technological innovation, and creates pathways for upward social mobility, especially for younger generations. This dual impact of military modernization illustrates the theoretical frameworks of [Huntington \(1957\)](#) regarding institutional legitimacy and [Todaro and Smith \(2020\)](#) on sustainable economic development, highlighting the interconnected nature of security and socio-economic progress.

The results show that strategic international cooperation can accelerate economic growth through human capital development, infrastructure enhancement, and technology transfer investments. Such partnerships contribute to the professionalization of domestic institutions, align national standards with global benchmarks, and enhance a state's ability to integrate into international frameworks. Croatia's experience illustrates the broader significance of military modernization as a catalyst for regional development and long-term economic sustainability. On a societal level, military reform not only reflects but also reinforces patterns of social change. Technological advancements and international collaborations create new career opportunities, improve public perceptions of national institutions, and foster trust in governance. However, the study acknowledges generational divides and concerns about dependency, emphasizing the importance of balancing international partnerships with domestic innovation to ensure sustainable outcomes. Policymakers should leverage these partnerships to foster technological advancements while maintaining societal cohesion. This includes designing strategies that integrate external support with local capacity-building initiatives, ensuring that modernization efforts align with national identity and long-term development priorities. This research contributes to broader discussions on economic development and social transformation, positioning military modernization as a unique yet often overlooked driver of progress. By providing insights into the interplay between transnational security cooperation, economic modernization, and societal well-being, the findings offer a robust analytical foundation for policymakers. Croatia's experience serves as a valuable case study for other countries seeking to leverage international partnerships for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, demonstrating the potential of military modernization to drive systemic transformation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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