



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Croatia external relations briefing:**

# **Croatia's Acquisition of the First Three Rafale F3-R Fighter Jets: An Overview of the Purchase and Relations with France**

**Valentino Petrović**


### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# **Croatia's Acquisition of the First Three Rafale F3-R Fighter Jets: An Overview of the Purchase and Relations with France**

## **Summary**

*This article will discuss the purchase of 12 military fighter jets Rafale F3-R that Croatia acquired from France. The four main competitors included in the process were the United States offering the new F-16 Block 70 model, Sweden offering the new Gripen C/D model, Israel offering the used F-16 Block 30 model, and France offering the used Rafale model. Eventually, the Croatian Government opted for Rafale, with the contract being signed in November 2021. The first two jets were delivered in October 2023, and the third a month later. The article will present the circumstances surrounding the process and the reasoning behind the decision, as well as the security concerns that encouraged the purchase.*

## **Introduction**

On November 17, Croatia formally acquired the third multi-purpose fighter jet Rafale, with the ceremony being held at the French Air Force base Mont-de-Marsan. The first two jets were acquired in early October, leaving the other nine jets to be transferred in December 2023, as well as throughout 2024, and in early 2025. This marked the beginning of the process that started several years ago: in 2019, the Croatian Government made a decision to reinforce the country's military and defense capacities by acquiring a new fleet of used fighter jets. In May 2021, France's bid was selected as the most appropriate despite international tender involving aircraft from the United States, Israel, and Sweden. In November 2021, the contracts were signed with Dassault Aviation, MBDA France, and Safran Electronic & Defense, which included the purchase of 10 single-seater jets and 2 two-seaters.

From the national security perspective, the purchase of French Rafale fighter jets is perceived as a strategic attempt of the Government of Croatia to upgrade and modernize the country's air force taking into account that the life expectancy of the current MiG-21 fleet expires in 2024<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, with the new fleet of 12 fighter jets, Croatia aims to contribute to

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<sup>1</sup> Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo obrane. 2023. Avion Rafale za moderno Hrvatsko ratno zrakoplovstvo <https://www.morh.hr/avion-rafale-za-moderno-hrvatsko-ratno-zrakoplovstvo/>.

the safety of the air space in the region and become a leader when it comes to military equipment. From the political perspective, the decision to purchase French jets opens up possibilities to strengthen bilateral relations, which includes not only politics, but economic, scientific, and industry cooperation. With France gradually taking over the non-formal role of the European Union (EU) leader, such a decision of Croatia was not considered arguable.

### **The Public's Perception of the Fighter Jets Purchase**

When the purchase of the new, albeit used fleet of fighter jets went into the Croatian public, the reactions were safe to say divided. There were those who approved of such a decision of the Government, arguing that the military power of a country should be invested in, taking into account the obsolete air force of Croatia. Likewise, having in mind the war-torn nineties and the conflicts with neighboring countries, some parts of the Croatian population will always place themselves on security, rather than the freedom pole. Such an understanding gained momentum after the War in Ukraine took the spotlight in every news, especially after the Soviet-made reconnaissance aerial vehicle (military drone) crashed in Zagreb on 10 March 2022 causing criticism of the country's defense system and concern of the wider public just a few weeks after the outbreak of the war on the East. Both heads of the executive reacted, claiming it was a serious incident that could have caused casualties in the capital; but luckily, no one was on the site when the vehicle crashed. Furthermore, the lack of reaction from the EU and NATO leaders definitely added to the opinion of those who argued in favor of buying new military equipment, including fighter jets.

On the other hand, there were those part of the population who questioned the necessity of having a fleet of used jets, and that criticism could be discussed from political, economic, and military perspectives. Politically, the narrative of the skeptical part of the population has always been that Croatia, a relatively small and uninfluential country in the international community, is attempting to make itself more significant than it already is, with its pro-European leaders trying to "buy" affection and sympathy of their Western counterparts by participating in such projects. From the economic perspective, the point was that the country is still recovering from the disastrous earthquakes in the cities of Petrinja and Zagreb in late 2020 and early 2021, with many buildings still waiting for renovation, and people living in containers until their homes are rebuilt. Even though the money for reconstruction is provided by the EU, many argued in favor of such social, rather than military projects. Finally, from the military perspective, opponents of the fighter jet purchase argued that Croatia is not a target of any

possible attack, while its security is provided by NATO and its Western allies; therefore, there was no need to invest in defense capacities and duplicate resources.

### **Experts and Politics on the Fighter Jets Purchase**

After the Croatian Government decided to start the process of acquiring fighter jets, there were four main competitors who issued their bids. Those were the United States offering the new F-16 Block 70 model, Sweden offering the new Gripen C/D model, Israel offering the used F-16 Block 30 model, and France offering the used Rafale model. Each competitor offered a different number of jets, with different dates of delivery; however, all bids included training for pilots and technicians who should maintain the jets, as well as logistics support throughout the process and equipment for military personnel. According to Zvonimir Frka-Petešić, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, the objective was to acquire fourth-generation fighter jets, compatible with NATO standards, and Western technology<sup>2</sup>. The other details were kept classified by the Government to protect the integrity of the process. In September 2020, the tender for acquiring bids was closed, which marked the beginning of the evaluation process. This was led by the expert committee under specific criteria including the quality of fighter jets and time of delivery as the most important criterion, diplomatic relations with countries that issued bids as the second most important criterion, and the cost of purchase as the last criterion<sup>3</sup>.

While the public and politics got the impression that the decision would eventually fall on the American F-16 Block 70 model due to the importance of preserving a strategic partnership with the United States, taking into account the role of the country during the Croatian accession to the NATO and military equipment worth half a billion dollars that the US donated to Croatia, expert opinion was somewhat different and nuanced. Igor Tabak, a member of the Defense Committee of the Croatian Parliament and a renowned expert in security and foreign affairs, argued in favor of Swedish Gripen: "Gripen is more suitable for Croatia. The F-16 is an aircraft designed for the most powerful superpower with unlimited resources, while the Gripen is designed for a country that anticipates that its airports would be the first targets in a war, so they created an aircraft that can land on roads. In Croatia, all the infrastructure for

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<sup>2</sup> Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2020. Zaprimljene ponude za nabavu borbenog aviona u MORH-u <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/zaprimljene-ponude-za-nabavu-borbenog-aviona-u-morh-u/30315>.

<sup>3</sup> Žabec, Krešimir. 2020. Borbeni avioni za Hrvatsku: Evo kako ponude stoje kad se gledaju ključni faktori nabave. Jutarnji.hr <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/borbeni-avioni-za-hrvatsku-evo-kako-ponude-stoje-kad-se-gledaju-kljucni-faktori-nabave-15006996>.

Gripen already exists; for the F-16, we would have to invest a lot."<sup>4</sup>. However, the consensus was that in any case, Croatia should opt for new fighter jets, not the used ones, since it would guarantee safety for at least 20 years and would not risk additional repairs which would only harm the state's budget in the long-term.

While the Government kept the unbiased approach when commenting on the purchase of fighter jets, President of the Republic Zoran Milanović was more open to express his opinion, favoring one option, even though he would later comment that he too was unbiased. After the four main competitors remained in the game, President Milanović argued that the best solution would be to go for the US F-16 Block 70 model for all the reasons mentioned in the previous chapter (strategic partnership, donated equipment). Since he did not participate in the process, with no one of his representatives being in the expert committee that evaluated the bids, the President claimed that there was no conflict of interest for him to speak out loud about what he considers is the best offer. Furthermore, he implied that Croatia should negotiate directly with the US, without having to listen to other offers presented during the process which only decelerates and delays the final decision. Taking into consideration continuous conflicts with the Government on other matters, one has to underline that on several occasions Milanović said he would support the position of the Government with regard to fighter jets since he considers this an important milestone in the Croatian security system.

In hindsight, one could point out that the President did not interfere, nor did he criticize the Government which was often the case in the national security issues, such as during the appointments of military officers or when commenting on the circumstances of the War in Ukraine. He agreed that the purchase of the new fleet of fight jets is necessary, taking into account the unsafe international security environment, other countries' attempts to raise their military equipment readiness, as well as the obsolete Croatian aircraft. However, he highlighted the need to have a just and transparent process, and he expressed doubts in the committee's expertise that will make the right decision. Furthermore, he underlined that he was not asked by the Government to suggest any of his representatives to participate in the work of the committee. All in all, from the political perspective, there was an agreement that such a project is necessary for the country to take part in the international security and military affairs.

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<sup>4</sup> Index.hr. 2020. Vojni analitičar Tabak: Gripen je najbolji izbor za Hrvatsku <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/vojni-analiticar-tabak-gripen-je-najbolji-izbor-za-hrvatsku/2212179.aspx>.

## **The Decision on the French Rafale Fighter Jets**

Eventually, based on the evaluation of the expert committee, the Government led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković decided in favor of 12 French Rafale F3-R fighter jets, 10 single-seaters and 2 two-seaters. The contract was worth EUR 999.068.493 and was signed on 25 November 2021. As referred by then Minister of Defense Mario Banožić, the lifespan of the acquired jets can be prolonged, while they can be used for the next 30 years. When asked if this implies strengthening of the relations between Croatia and France, the Prime Minister said: “France is a member of the EU, the sole nuclear power after the United Kingdom's exit, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and also the only EU member that is a permanent member of the Security Council. It is a country with which we have a signed strategic partnership since 2010, and I am confident that this choice will be an incentive for the enhancement of partnership and bilateral relations.”<sup>5</sup>. When asked to comment on the decision not to choose American jets, the Prime Minister said that this will not endanger the relations with the US whose embassy in Zagreb supported the acquisition of French fighter jets. Therefore, at least from the diplomatic perspective, it appears that all sides finished the process on a good note.

The signing of the contract was done during French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Zagreb which marked the first official visit of any French head of state since Croatia gained independence in 1991. During Macron's visit Croatia still did not enter the Schengen Zone nor the Eurozone; thus, it was considered that France would provide support to Croatia during both processes, as well as during the country's accession to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>6</sup>. In return, France wanted stronger military cooperation outside of NATO, but also wanted political support with regards to its initiatives in the EU. The latter appeared problematic, at least when it comes to the EU enlargement in Southeast Europe, since France was rather skeptical about it, claiming that the criteria for EU accession need to be altered. This eventually led to the blockade in the opening of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Conversely, Croatia always supported the EU integration of its neighboring countries. In recent years, however, Macron had a change of heart, claiming that the EU needs to grow on political, rather than bureaucratic terms, and eventually gave a visit to Albania in October 2023.

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<sup>5</sup> Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2021. Plenković: Rafale stižu u Hrvatsku 2024. <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-rafale-stizu-u-hrvatsku-2024/32218>.

<sup>6</sup> Srzić, Ante. 2021. Macron stiže na krilima Rafalea: Analiziramo što Hrvatskoj strateški donosi posjet francuskoga predsjednika. Tportal [https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/macron-stize-na-krilima-rafalea-analiziramo-sto-hrvatskoj-strateski-donosi-posjet-francuskoga-predsjednika-foto-20211122?meta\\_refresh=1](https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/macron-stize-na-krilima-rafalea-analiziramo-sto-hrvatskoj-strateski-donosi-posjet-francuskoga-predsjednika-foto-20211122?meta_refresh=1).

In July 2023, then Minister of Defense Mario Banožić took part in the occasion of the Bastille Day that was held in Zagreb. When addressing the French Ambassador, Banožić underlined that the purchase of fighter jets opens up new possibilities for military cooperation with France, referring to the short-range air defense system Mistral, but also highlighted that the two countries aim to strengthen their economic cooperation in their fields of transport and energy, as well as green technology and digitalization<sup>7</sup>. Military cooperation is envisaged to lead to further scientific, research, and industry projects such as those spearheaded by higher education institutions, i.e. universities, professional schools, or institutes of technology, or projects led by small- and medium-sized enterprises or businesses; thus, contributing to the economic growth. To what extent any of those collaborative projects will materialize, is to be seen in the upcoming years. From today's perspective, good foundations have been set, while the prevalence of the role of scientists and engineers is expected to minimize the impact of possible turnarounds in political leadership either in France or Croatia. Therefore, the long-term impact of the purchase of Rafale fighter jets should be guaranteed regardless of political circumstances that might happen in the future.

### **Serbia's Attempt to Strengthen Its Military Aircraft**

Apart from Croatia, there was one other country in Southeast Europe that showed interest in French Rafale fighter jets. In February 2023, while participating at the International Defence Exhibition & Conference (IDEX), Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said that the country is currently negotiating with France over the purchase of the same fighter jets that Croatia signed a contract for in 2021. He underlined that if the deal was reached, it would be the largest financial allocation from the military budget that the country ever faced. Only four months later, in June 2023, Vučić reiterated the position of Serbia to buy Rafale jets, claiming that the biggest issue is finances which he projects would cost the country approximately 3 billion EUR<sup>8</sup>. Taking into account that Serbia still heavily relies on Russian military equipment and Chinese combat drones and mid-range surface-to-air missiles, one could argue that such a move could mark a reorientation in its international security and military affairs. After all, Serbia "curtailed military cooperation with Moscow since Russia invaded Ukraine and has condemned the

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<sup>7</sup> N1info.hr. 2023. Croatia-France partnership has never been more important, says minister <https://n1info.hr/english/news/croatia-france-partnership-has-never-been-more-important-says-minister/>.

<sup>8</sup> Vasović, Aleksandar and Sekularac, Ivana. 2023. Serbia discusses price of French Rafale jets, in shift from ally Russia. Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/serbia-arms-vucic-idUSL8N3812FT/>.

invasion, but unlike the EU and others it has not imposed sanctions on Moscow”<sup>9</sup>. However, the question remains if the deal would be greenlit because Serbia is not a member of NATO, while it is dubious if France would be willing to sell military equipment to a non-alliance country.

## **Conclusion**

This article provided an overview of Croatia's purchase of French Rafale F3-R fighter jets with the first three aircraft being delivered in October and November of 2023. Likewise, the article showed how the public and politicians, as well as experts in national security, perceive the acquisition of military jets, taking into consideration that the process included the offers of three other bidders: the United States (new F-16 Block 70 model), Sweden (new Gripen C/D model), Israel (used F-16 Block 30 model). The decision was made by the Government based on the analysis of the expert committee. However, during the process, like in many other cases in Croatia, different voices were heard with some supporting the purchase, and others eagerly opposing, claiming that there are other areas where the Government should invest. Due to the need to upgrade and modernize the country's military aircraft, as well as to strengthen its partnerships, Croatia decided on the used Rafale model offered by French companies.

While the Government kept the process confidential, only providing information that was necessary for the Croatian public to hear, President Zoran Milanović commented that the best option would be to opt for the new US F-16 aircraft. However, after the process ended, he claimed that he never pushed for the US model, only supporting it due to the importance of having good relations with Washington, and as a token of gratitude for all military equipment that the US donated to Croatia. As for the other aspects included in the purchase, Croatia and France agreed upon the training of Croatia's pilots and technological and logistics support for Croatian personnel who will maintain the newly acquired aircraft. Likewise, the partnership is expected to lead to further projects in the fields of science, research, and military industry. According to the words of Government officials, the Croatian sky should be safe for at least 30 years; hopefully, with no need to use the Rafale fighter jets.

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<sup>9</sup> Vasović, Aleksandar and Sekularac, Ivana. 2023. Serbia discusses price of French Rafale jets, in shift from ally Russia. Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/serbia-arms-vucic-idUSL8N3812FT/>.