CONCEPTUAL / PRACTICE-BASED FRAMEWORK · LEADERSHIP SYSTEMS

Vanguard Intelligence Systems (VIS): An AI-Augmented Framework for Decision-Making in the NEO Era

Damir Stručić

Croatian Defence Academy "Dr. Franjo Tuđman", Zagreb, Croatia

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ABSTRACT

Organizations operating in volatile environments increasingly fail not because they lack strategic intent, but because their decision processes degrade under pressure into narrative contests, escalation loops, approval bottlenecks, and post-hoc rationalization. This article introduces Vanguard Intelligence Systems (VIS), an AI-augmented decision framework developed at COTRUGLI Business School, designed to convert uncertainty into aligned action for high-stakes market entry and operations decisions. VIS integrates explicit decision governance, competing-hypothesis analysis using falsification logic (least disproved option), rigorous evidence provenance standards, operational uncertainty management through measurable tripwires (kill indicators) linked to predefined actions, and embedded artificial intelligence through a multi-agent system that augments each phase of the decision cycle. The method culminates in a one-page Decision Brief and a 90-day execution loop with after-action review. VIS is positioned as a leadership operating system for the NEO era (Networked, Exponential, Orchestrated), enabling decentralized execution within clear intent and guardrails. The framework has been validated through a 12-month pilot program with over 50 users across both defense/security and commercial decision domains. Practical implementation guidance and core artifacts are provided to support disciplined adoption.

KEYWORDS: *decision discipline; leadership operating systems; evidence provenance; uncertainty management; falsification logic; distributed execution; AI-augmented decisions; human-AI teaming; market entry; operations*

1 Introduction

In complex and high-velocity environments, leaders rarely fail due to lack of ambition or analytical capacity. Failure more often emerges from decision process breakdown: unclear intent, ambiguous ownership, selective evidence, hidden assumptions, and weak translation of decisions into executable commitments. Under time pressure, organizations drift toward familiar anti-patterns such as analysis theater, approval cascades, internal politics, and consensus by fatigue, creating slow

cycles and fragmented accountability. Research confirms the scope of this problem: Nutt (2002) found that roughly half of organizational decisions fail, predominantly due to process breakdowns rather than analytical error.

Vanguard Intelligence Systems (VIS) is a decision framework developed at COTRUGLI Business School to address these failure modes by making decision work explicit, auditable, and operational. VIS is designed for situations where uncertainty cannot be eliminated by waiting and where execution requires distributed coordination, especially in market entry and operations contexts.

VIS does not attempt to replace strategic thinking; it systematizes how strategic thinking becomes repeatable decisions that teams can execute. Its core claim is straightforward: in NEO conditions, decision advantage belongs to organizations that can compress learning loops while retaining intellectual honesty and organizational alignment.

What distinguishes VIS from prior decision frameworks is its integration of embedded artificial intelligence. Through a multi-agent AI architecture, VIS augments each phase of the decision cycle, from automated evidence scanning and hypothesis stress-testing to real-time kill indicator monitoring and decision brief synthesis. This positions VIS not merely as a structured analytic technique but as an AI-augmented leadership operating system.

2 Decision Advantage in the NEO Era

VIS is designed for what Kapusta (2025) defines as the NEO era, characterized by three structural conditions:

- **Networked.** Advantage is increasingly a function of information flow across distributed teams and partner ecosystems rather than centralized control.
- **Exponential.** Change accelerates; the cost of waiting for certainty becomes strategically prohibitive.
- **Orchestrated.** Multiple decisions occur in parallel; coordination must rely on shared intent and transparent reasoning rather than continuous top-down instruction.

The NEO framework advances beyond VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity), which was developed at the U.S. Army War College in the 1990s to describe the post-Cold War environment (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), and BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible; Cascio, 2018), which captures the phenomenology of disruption. NEO differs from these predecessors in three ways. First, it is structural rather than descriptive: it identifies the operational conditions that demand a particular decision system design, rather than cataloguing environmental challenges. Second, it is actionable: the three NEO properties map directly to VIS design requirements such as distributed sensing for networked environments, compressed loops for exponential tempo, and shared intent for orchestrated execution. Third, NEO is empirically grounded in demonstrated capabilities: Amazon's simultaneous multi-domain supply chain optimization, Google's real-time behavioral analysis at population scale, and Ukraine's AI-enhanced drone swarm coordination in Operation Spider Web each validate specific NEO properties in operational contexts (Kapusta, 2025; Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, 2025).

The leadership implication is that organizations require a decision system that supports speed with coherence, decentralization without fragmentation. VIS is built as a decision nervous system: a disciplined way to observe, orient, decide, and act rapidly without collapsing into chaos or mythology. This framing draws on Boyd's OODA loop (Osinga, 2007) while incorporating the transformation from sequential to simultaneous processing that NEO operations demand (Kapusta, 2026).

3 Theoretical Foundations and Intellectual Lineage

VIS draws on and integrates four established intellectual traditions, each contributing specific operational logic to the framework.

3.1 The Decision Cycle: From Boyd to NEO

John Boyd's OODA loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) established the foundational insight that competitive advantage accrues to the actor who can cycle through decision iterations faster than opponents (Osinga, 2007). Boyd's framework has been widely adopted in both military doctrine and business strategy (Richards, 2004). VIS incorporates Boyd's tempo logic through its 90-day execution loop and compressed learning cycles.

However, as Kapusta (2025, 2026) argues, contemporary operating environments demand a shift from sequential to simultaneous processing. The Vanguard Leadership framework proposes that AI-augmented teams can transcend the sequential OODA model through what is termed NEO operations: simultaneous multi-domain and multi-function optimization beyond human cognitive limitations. VIS operationalizes this insight at the organizational decision level.

3.2 Mission Command and Distributed Execution

VIS's governance model (Commander's Intent, edge empowerment, and escalation triggers) derives from the mission command tradition (Auftragstaktik) as formalized in U.S. Army doctrine (ADP 6-0, 2019) and adapted for business organizations by Bungay (2010). Bungay demonstrated that mission command principles address three persistent organizational gaps: the knowledge gap, the alignment gap, and the effects gap. VIS operationalizes Bungay's insight by providing specific artifacts such as the Decision Brief for intent clarity, the kill indicator system for gap detection, and the After-Action Review for effects assessment.

The transition from human-only mission command to AI-augmented Vanguard Leadership (Kapusta, 2026) introduces a new requirement: establishing shared contextual references between human commanders and algorithmic systems. VIS's evidence register and provenance rule serve this function, creating machine-readable decision contexts that enable AI agents to support each phase of the decision cycle.

3.3 Structured Analytic Techniques: ACH and Falsification

VIS's competing-hypothesis matrix adapts Heuer's Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH), originally developed for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to counteract cognitive biases in intelligence assessment (Heuer, 1999). ACH's core innovation was methodological: rather than asking which hypothesis the evidence supports, ACH asks which hypothesis the evidence most strongly disconfirms. This falsification logic, rooted in Popperian epistemology (Popper, 1959), reverses the natural human tendency toward confirmation bias.

VIS does not claim that organizational decisions can be subjected to strict Popperian falsification. Observation is theory-laden (Kuhn, 1962), and what counts as disconfirming evidence depends on background assumptions that are themselves not fully testable in isolation (Lakatos, 1970). Rather, VIS employs falsification as a cognitive forcing strategy, shifting the default question from what supports our preference to what would disprove it. This approach is empirically supported by Tetlock's research on superforecasters, which found that forecasters using actively disconfirming reasoning significantly outperformed those relying on confirmatory logic (Tetlock & Gardner, 2015).

3.4 Evidence-Based Management and Decision Governance

VIS's evidence provenance rule draws on the evidence-based management (EBM) tradition established by Rousseau (2006) and Pfeffer and Sutton (2006). VIS's governance roles (Decision Owner, Recommender, Consulted, Informed) adapt the DACI model widely used in technology organizations. The adaptation separates accountability for outcome (Decision Owner) from accountability for process integrity (Recommender), a distinction critical in distributed decision environments.

4 VIS as a COTRUGLI Method

VIS is a defined method with governance logic, artifacts, and operating rules developed at COTRUGLI Business School. The framework was created by Dražen Kapusta, Founder and Principal of COTRUGLI Business School, as part of the COTRUGLI curriculum, and is currently deployed within the school's Vanguard MBA program. Within the institutional collaboration between COTRUGLI Business School and the University of Defence and Security “Dr. Franjo Tuđman” (SOIS), the author has tested and evaluated the framework in defense and security decision contexts, with the intention of integrating VIS into the SOIS curriculum.

VIS standardizes decision quality through five non-negotiable properties:

1. **Accountability clarity:** single decision owner; explicit recommender role; defined consultation boundaries.
2. **Auditability:** evidence, reasoning, assumptions, and commitments must be reviewable and traceable.
3. **Falsification discipline:** options are stress-tested through disconfirming logic rather than defended through persuasion.
4. **Operationalization of uncertainty:** assumptions are converted into measurable indicators with predefined triggers and actions.
5. **AI augmentation:** embedded intelligence supports each phase of the decision cycle through automated evidence scanning, hypothesis stress-testing, and real-time monitoring.

VIS aims to create shared language and muscle memory across teams so that decision rigor does not depend on individual style.

BOX 1 VIS at a Glance

Purpose: Convert uncertainty into aligned action for high-stakes decisions.

Best-fit decisions: Market entry, GTM shifts, operational redesign, major partnerships, investment bets, crisis response.

Core output: One-page Decision Brief, a 90-day micro-plan, and a scheduled After-Action Review (AAR).

Distinctives: Provenance rule (trace to raw records), competing-hypothesis matrix, assumption register, kill indicators, edge empowerment rules, and embedded AI augmentation.

5 Core Principles of the VIS Discipline

5.1 Intent at the Center, Sensing at the Edge

VIS assumes leaders create speed by broadcasting Commander's Intent (why the decision matters, what success looks like, and what constraints are non-negotiable) while empowering edge teams to conduct sensing and run micro-tests (Bungay, 2010). Orchestration is achieved through shared context and clear guardrails, not constant approvals.

5.2 Falsification Logic: Selecting the Least Disproved Option

VIS shifts the question from how do we justify our preferred choice to what would disprove each plausible option. Rather than optimizing persuasion, VIS optimizes resilience under uncertainty. The leading option is the one most robust to disconfirming evidence: the least disproved. This approach functions as a cognitive forcing strategy that counteracts confirmation bias without claiming epistemic certainty (Heuer, 1999; Tetlock & Gardner, 2015).

5.3 All-Source Sensing for Diagnostic Clarity

VIS prioritizes evidence that differentiates among options (diagnostic evidence) rather than evidence that merely supports a general story. The method encourages multiple independent sensing channels such as customer signals, operational telemetry, financial indicators, partner feedback, and regulatory cues, emphasizing independence and disconfirming inputs (Heuer & Pherson, 2010).

5.4 Trust Through Transparency

In distributed environments, traditional oversight mechanisms can be too slow. VIS treats transparency as a control mechanism: when stakeholders can inspect evidence, assumptions, and logic, commitment becomes easier, even among those not directly involved in the decision build. This approach aligns with the evidence-based management principle that transparency substitutes for hierarchical control in complex organizations (Rousseau, 2006).

6 The VIS Process Model: Four Phases, One Decision Artifact

- **Phase 1, Decision Scoping and Governance.** Constructs the arena in which the decision will be made: domain, tempo, risk posture, non-negotiables, roles, deadlines, and constraints.
- **Phase 2, Hypothesis Testing and Evidence Analysis (Competing-Hypothesis Matrix).** The analytical core: a structured comparison of competing hypotheses against a defined evidence register using falsification scoring.
- **Phase 3, Risk and Uncertainty Management.** Makes assumptions explicit and operationalizes them via kill indicators (observable tripwires) and formal bias challenges.
- **Phase 4, Decision Brief and 90-Day Action Plan.** Culminates in a one-page Decision Brief and a 90-day micro-plan with explicit execution rules, escalation triggers, and an After-Action Review.

7 Phase 1: Decision Scoping and Governance

7.1 Mission Context

VIS begins by specifying: decision domain (Market Entry or Operations), time horizon (90-day loop or explicitly defined alternative), risk posture (conservative, balanced, aggressive), and non-negotiables (legal, ethical, brand, and customer trust constraints).

7.2 Governance Roles

VIS formalizes accountability via decision governance. The Decision Owner (D) is accountable for the outcome and commits resources. The Recommender (R) is accountable for process integrity and analysis quality. The Consulted (C) provide evidence and expert input. The Informed (I) are stakeholders informed post-decision. Also required: a decision deadline and resource constraints.

7.3 Evidence Infrastructure and the Provenance Rule

VIS requires a case workspace and an evidence register with freshness controls.

The Provenance Rule (non-negotiable): every evidence item must be traceable to raw underlying records such as CRM entries, operational logs, invoices, and field notes. Summaries may be used, but they cannot replace the raw source. For tacit or observational evidence such as corridor conversations, customer sentiment, and field observations, the standard shifts to documented attribution: who observed what, when, and in what context.

7.4 Empowering the Edge

VIS operationalizes distributed execution by defining default edge team roles (domain-specific), edge decision rights (what can be decided without escalation), and escalation triggers (often linked to kill indicators defined in Phase 3).

8 Phase 2: Hypothesis Testing and Evidence Analysis

8.1 Frame the Decision

VIS requires two statements: Commander's Intent (why it matters plus what success looks like) and a SMART decision question (who decides what, by when, and under which constraints), along with explicit in-scope and out-of-scope boundaries.

8.2 Generate Competing Hypotheses

VIS requires a minimum set to avoid narrow framing: a preferred option, a conservative or minimal-change option, an aggressive option, and one to two credible alternatives (including a wildcard if relevant).

8.3 Build the Evidence Register

Evidence items are listed with a clear evidence statement, a raw record link (per the Provenance Rule), freshness (cut date), reliability (H/M/L), and a sensing channel tag.

Independence Standard (high-stakes): use evidence from at least three independent channels, including at least one channel designed to disconfirm the leading hypothesis.

8.4 Competing-Hypothesis Matrix (ACH-lite)

VIS scores each evidence item against each hypothesis using four codes (adapted from Heuer, 1999):

Code	Definition
`C`	Consistent (supports the hypothesis)
`I`	Inconsistent (contradicts the hypothesis)
`N`	Not diagnostic (no bearing)
`?`	Unknown (requires collection or clarification)

8.5 Matrix Readout (Decision Diagnostics)

VIS produces four diagnostic outputs: the most diagnostic evidence items, the most contradicted hypothesis, the least disproved hypothesis (current leader), and the one evidence item most likely to flip the decision. This last output is VIS's distinctive contribution: it converts analysis into a sensing agenda, telling teams not only what to decide now, but what to look for next.

9 Phase 3: Risk and Uncertainty Management

9.1 Assumption Register

For the leading hypothesis, VIS requires an assumption register with confidence (H/M/L), impact if wrong (H/M/L), and an owner. Teams then select one to two assumptions that would be most damaging if false.

9.2 Kill Indicators (Observable Tripwires)

VIS converts critical assumptions into measurable tripwires: a kill indicator definition (observable), a trigger threshold, a monitoring cadence, and a predefined action: GO / LEARN / STOP.

This mechanism reduces silent failure by making risk operational rather than rhetorical. It echoes the tripwire concept described by Heath and Heath (2013) but provides greater operational specificity through explicit monitoring cadence and ownership.

9.3 Formal Bias Challenge

Before recommendation, VIS requires a short written bias challenge designed to neutralize predictable distortions: confirmation loops, salience or availability distortions, mirror-imaging of competitor or actor behavior, and overconfidence.

The output is a disciplined uncertainty statement: what is known, what is unknown, and what will be monitored. This component draws on the critical thinking pedagogy developed as part of the broader COTRUGLI curriculum on cognitive bias and structured reasoning.

10 Phase 4: Decision Brief and 90-Day Execution Loop

10.1 The One-Page VIS Decision Brief

The Decision Brief includes Commander's Intent and the SMART decision question; the hypotheses considered (and key evidence for and against); the leading option and confidence (Low, Medium, High); key caveats; top assumptions, kill indicators, triggers, and owners; the final recommendation (GO / LEARN / STOP); and a commitment statement (who does what by when).

10.2 90-Day Micro-Plan

VIS makes execution explicit through three workstreams (domain-specific), five milestones, core KPIs, and escalation rules tied to kill indicators and critical KPI breaches.

10.3 After-Action Review (AAR)

VIS requires a scheduled AAR to institutionalize learning, following the U.S. Army's after-action review methodology (Morrison & Meliza, 1999): forecast accuracy, assumption failures, decision speed, execution friction, and KPI deltas. The objective is system improvement, not blame allocation.

BOX 2 The VIS Minimum Artifact Set

1. Decision Charter (Owner / Recommender / Deadline / Constraints)
2. Evidence Register (with provenance and freshness)
3. Competing-Hypothesis Matrix (ACH-lite)
4. Assumption Register
5. Kill Indicators Table (tripwires and actions)
6. One-page Decision Brief
7. 90-day Micro-Plan and AAR date

11 AI Augmentation Across VIS Phases

VIS advances beyond traditional decision frameworks through embedded artificial intelligence. The Vanguard Agent architecture employs a multi-agent AI system with specialized agents supporting each VIS phase.

11.1 Architecture Overview

The system uses a central orchestrator coordinating domain-specific specialist agents: a Data Intelligence Agent for evidence gathering and provenance verification, a Strategy and Domain Expert Agent for hypothesis generation and competitive analysis, a Vanguard Coach Agent for bias challenge facilitation and decision process guidance, a Dealflow and Network Agent for stakeholder mapping and partnership intelligence, and a Compliance and Ethics Agent for regulatory boundary monitoring.

This multi-agent architecture aligns with the emerging field of Decision Intelligence (Kozyrkov, 2019), which argues that organizations' primary limitation is not data availability but decision-process quality. The architecture also draws on the HAI5 (Human-AI Integration at Five Levels) method proposed in the Vanguard Leadership framework (Kapusta, 2026), which recognizes five distinct modes of human-AI collaboration appropriate for different decision contexts.

11.2 AI Augmentation by Phase

Phase 1 (Scoping). AI agents scan organizational data systems, regulatory databases, and market intelligence feeds to generate initial evidence landscapes, identify relevant precedents, and flag potential constraints, reducing setup time from days to hours.

Phase 2 (Hypothesis Testing). The Strategy Agent generates alternative hypotheses beyond the team's initial framing, queries the evidence register against each hypothesis, and flags diagnostic gaps (evidence items that would differentiate among hypotheses but have not yet been collected). The system can identify the single evidence item most likely to flip the decision, converting analysis into a prioritized sensing agenda.

Phase 3 (Risk Management). AI agents continuously monitor kill indicators against real-time data feeds, generating automated alerts when trigger thresholds approach or breach. The Coach Agent

facilitates structured bias challenges by presenting counter-arguments and disconfirming evidence that teams may have overlooked.

Phase 4 (Execution). AI synthesizes the Decision Brief from accumulated evidence, scoring, and assumptions, maintaining full provenance links. During the 90-day execution loop, agents track KPI trajectories and flag deviations requiring escalation.

11.3 Human-AI Integration

VIS preserves human decision authority throughout. AI augments human judgment; it does not replace it. The Decision Owner retains full accountability for the outcome. AI contributions are transparently labeled, with provenance tracking that allows any stakeholder to inspect the reasoning chain from raw evidence through AI-generated analysis to human decision. This transparency is essential for maintaining trust in distributed decision environments (Kapusta, 2026).

12 Pilot Validation: Dual-Use Evidence

VIS has been validated through a 12-month pilot program with over 50 users across dual-use contexts, both defense/security and commercial decision domains. The pilot encompassed market entry analysis, operational redesign, crisis response, partnership evaluation, and investment assessment.

The dual-use validation is significant because it demonstrates framework robustness under heterogeneous conditions. Decision frameworks that function only within a single sector or context type may reflect domain-specific assumptions rather than generalizable decision logic. VIS's ability to support structured decision-making across military operations planning and commercial strategy suggests that its core architecture (competing-hypothesis analysis, evidence provenance, kill indicators, and AI augmentation) captures domain-independent decision principles.

Within the collaboration between COTRUGLI Business School and the University of Defence and Security “Dr. Franjo Tuđman” (SOIS), the author has independently tested and evaluated the framework in defense and security decision contexts, assessing its methodological alignment with intelligence analysis practice and mission command doctrine. This evaluation forms part of a broader initiative to integrate VIS into the SOIS curriculum, extending the framework's dual-use validation into formal defense and security education.

The AI-augmented version of VIS was implemented as a custom GPT with a domain-specific knowledge base, allowing users to interact with the framework through natural language while maintaining methodological discipline. User feedback indicated that the AI augmentation was most valued in three areas: generating alternative hypotheses beyond the team's initial framing, identifying diagnostic evidence gaps, and maintaining provenance discipline across extended decision cycles.

Formal evaluation against conventional decision routines using measurable outcomes (time-to-decision, forecast accuracy, execution speed, assumption-to-outcome tracking, and learning velocity across iterative loops) represents a priority for future research.

13 Implementation Guidance: Adoption Without Transformation Theater

VIS is most effective when introduced as a habit, not a top-down transformation. A practical adoption sequence:

1. Select one consequential decision (Market Entry or Operations).
2. Run VIS end-to-end within a short cadence.
3. Publish the Decision Brief internally to normalize transparency.
4. Execute the 90-day loop with kill-indicator monitoring.
5. Conduct the AAR; update templates; calibrate thresholds.
6. Repeat until VIS becomes the default decision language.

The speed-rigor tension should be addressed directly: VIS's seven artifacts create overhead that is warranted for strategic-level decisions operating on 90-day timescales, not for tactical decisions requiring immediate response. For rapid tactical decisions, Klein's Recognition-Primed Decision research (1998) demonstrates that experienced decision-makers use pattern recognition effectively. VIS is designed for the domain where structured analysis adds value: consequential, non-routine decisions under uncertainty with distributed execution requirements.

14 Discussion: Why VIS Improves Speed and Quality

VIS improves decision performance via five mechanisms:

- **Governance clarity:** reduces diffusion of responsibility and escalation ambiguity.
- **Evidence discipline:** provenance, freshness, and independence reduce narrative dominance.
- **Falsification logic:** weakens confirmation dynamics and improves resilience under uncertainty (Tetlock & Gardner, 2015).
- **Operational uncertainty management:** assumptions become observable signals with predetermined actions, reducing silent failure.
- **AI augmentation:** automates evidence scanning, hypothesis generation, and kill indicator monitoring, compressing the learning loop while maintaining methodological rigor.

The combined effect is faster alignment and cleaner execution in distributed contexts.

15 Limitations and Future Research Directions

VIS is designed for high-stakes decisions; it may be unnecessary for routine approvals. The method also requires leadership willingness to tolerate transparency; organizations relying on managed ambiguity will resist adoption.

The AI augmentation layer introduces additional considerations: model reliability, hallucination risk, and the need for human oversight of AI-generated evidence assessments. VIS addresses these through its transparency architecture (all AI contributions are labeled and provenance-traceable), but organizations must develop competency in evaluating AI-assisted analysis.

Future research should evaluate VIS against conventional decision routines using measurable outcomes: time-to-decision, forecast accuracy, execution speed, assumption-to-outcome accuracy, learning velocity across iterative loops, kill indicator trigger rates, and AI recommendation acceptance rates. Comparative studies across decision domains and organizational contexts would further establish VIS's generalizability.

16 Conclusion

Vanguard Intelligence Systems (VIS) is an AI-augmented decision framework developed at COTRUGLI Business School for disciplined decision-making under uncertainty. It converts decision work from informal debate into an auditable chain of reasoning grounded in competing-hypothesis analysis, evidence provenance, explicit assumptions, operational tripwires, and embedded artificial intelligence. In the NEO era, where speed, alignment, and distributed execution increasingly determine outcomes, VIS offers a pragmatic leadership operating system for converting uncertainty into coordinated action.

VIS is distinguished from prior decision frameworks by three features: its integration of falsification logic from intelligence analysis with mission command governance from military doctrine, its operationalization of uncertainty through measurable kill indicators with predefined actions, and its embedded AI architecture that augments each phase of the decision cycle while preserving human decision authority. The framework's validation across both defense/security and commercial decision domains provides evidence of domain-independent applicability.

The transition from sequential human decision processing to AI-augmented simultaneous optimization, from OODA to NEO operations (Kapusta, 2025, 2026), requires not merely new technology but new decision architecture. VIS provides that architecture.

Author Biography

Brigadier Damir Stručić, PhD, is Deputy Commandant of the Croatian Defence Academy “Dr. Franjo Tuđman” in Zagreb and lectures at the University of Defence and Security “Dr. Franjo Tuđman”. His professional and academic work centers on national security, defense, and intelligence and counterintelligence. During the Croatian Homeland War he served in the intelligence system of the Republic of Croatia, gaining direct operational experience in a range of intelligence and counterintelligence missions. After the war he continued his career in the security-intelligence sector, holding a series of senior leadership positions within Croatia's national security system. In those roles he participated in drafting the legislation governing the security and intelligence services, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia, and numerous other strategic, planning, and implementation documents in the fields of security and intelligence and counterintelligence. His expertise combines long-standing operational experience, service at the highest management levels, and participation in shaping the Croatian security-intelligence system. His teaching and research focus on national security, intelligence and counterintelligence, strategic management of security systems, military education, and contemporary security challenges.

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