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'EASTERNIZATION' OF EUROPE'S SECURITY POLICY



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THE SECURITY POLICY OF HUNGARY

The sources of Hungary's foreign and security policy outlooks are inextricably linked to the country's location and its modern history. As all other countries situated between Russia's western and Germany's eastern borders, Hungary has traditionally been forced to bandwagon with the major power – or conglomerate of powers – willing to underwrite its security needs without necessarily exerting hegemonic influence over its policies. This realist geopolitical reference may not be in harmony with the language of the present-day European discourse on defense and security, but it goes a long way toward explaining the willingness of many small and medium European powers to challenge the French and German visions of European foreign policy.

Hungary – again, similarly to other accession countries – tends to judge the different western forms of integration and international organizations in broad functional terms. In this simplified view, the Council of Europe serves to promote democracy and the protection of human rights, the EU is primarily a vehicle of economic integration, while NATO remains the major provider of security (primarily traditional military security) in the region. This is the true division of labor as seen from Central and Eastern Europe, and it helps explain why, until recently, governments of the new member states had regularly shown surprise when these organizations overstepped their perceived functional boundaries. The European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) was at first seen as a rather superfluous pillar of the European integration.¹ Hungary's orientation to the United States for security won it the moniker “reflex Atlanticist” by some analysts – a reputation only confirmed by signing the open *Letter of Eight* on January 30, 2003. In signing the letter, the Hungarian Prime Minister echoed anxiety felt by all political elites of the region upon seeing a rift opening between the United States and the major European powers' vision of defense and security.

¹ On this “functionalist” view see Dunay, P.: *Az EU közös biztonság- és védelempolitikájának céltalansága: a tagságra váró országok nézőpontja* [The aimlessness of ESDP: the view from the accession countries]. Külügyi Szemle, Winter 2002.

THE PILLARS OF HUNGARIAN SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICY

Basic principles of Hungary's defense and security policies are outlined in the *Parliamentary Resolution 94/1998*, passed by a large majority of votes on the eve of Hungary's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on December 28, 1998.² The document starts from the premise that the successful integration of Hungary into the institutional framework of the Euroatlantic region necessitates a rethink of the main principles of the country's defense and security policies. Indeed, the document superseded a similar resolution from 1993 (*Parliamentary Resolution 11/1993*) that had served as consensual guide until Hungary joined NATO. Its new version embraced a wider definition of security in line with the basic NATO documents, including threats posed by international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), illegal drug trafficking, organized crime, and mass migration. The resolution declared that though the danger of a world-wide armed conflict had receded with the end of the bipolar international system, the potential sources of threats and the types of risks grew broader and more complex. This was tantamount to the admission that the traditional military interpretation of security threats was no longer adequate. It solemnly announced that Hungary views no state as its enemy.

To the extent that Hungary considers itself threatened, it looks to its membership in NATO – and the related mutual defense clause – as the most efficient way of guaranteeing its security. Importantly, the document also stresses that Hungary considers transatlantic cooperation the primary guarantor of all European security in the long run. It links Hungary's support for strengthening European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) to continued European participation in the existing structures of NATO – hence the repeated admonishments (in reference to EU operational headquarters and similar issues) not to create “parallel structures” and “inefficient multiplication of functions” between NATO and ESDP.

Although the 1998 resolution is five years old now, it is still valid as the broad outline of Hungary's defense and security outlook. It contained all the major themes that dramatically came to the foreground in the Atlantic rift around the war in Iraq. What is of even greater importance, however, is the fact that none of the major actors involved in the formulation of these strategic concepts has

² The vote was 328 for and 12 against. All the “no” votes came from the radical right wing party MIÉP.

since proposed changing or amending the text of the resolution. It is a clear sign that the order of priorities concerning Hungary's security policy has not changed since 1999.

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

For a small country like Hungary the major foreign policy and security concerns are regional. It has no significant interests outside the Euroatlantic region, therefore in most cases it will not voice strong dissent from the position of its major allies. In all other issues it will support the position of Europe, although it may put some extra emphasis on the importance and promotion of international institutions and norms.

Within the Euroatlantic region, however, there are three areas in which Hungary's stance may not fully coincide with that of its EU neighbors.³ As shown by the events of a year ago, one is the transatlantic connection. Hungarian statesmen will find any disturbance in EU-U.S. relations worrying, but they will be reluctant to take sides as long as they can avoid doing so. If, however, they are forced to show their particular allegiance, they would most probably come down on the side of the United States, the presumed final guarantor of military security.

The other region towards which Hungary may have a more independent viewpoint is the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The historic memory of the conduct of the Soviet Union (or even the Russian Empire) and the heavy-handed attempts of Boris Yeltsin at meddling in the affairs of the region towards the end of his presidency generated a certain weariness vis-à-vis Moscow among the political elites. The EU policy of influencing Russia through offers and practice of extensive cooperation is viewed from Budapest as yielding mixed results, with Europe too quick to drop pressure at the first sign of Russian displeasure. Hungary's former prime minister, Viktor Orbán, once said that: "...the more strongly we cooperate [with Russia] in the economic realm, the clearer and sharper the dividing line must be between us, as the easternmost member of NATO and the region lying to the east of us, in issues of military and security policy."⁴ Though couched in

rather ambiguous terms, the sentence was interpreted by the military to mean that there should be no spill-over from any increase in economic cooperation into the field of security. The latter is seen as the exclusive realm of "western" alliance structures.

On the other hand, Russia is one of the few foreign policy issues on which the two major parties might display some policy differences. The new head of the centre-left coalition, the current prime minister, Péter Medgyessy, has shown a much more conciliatory attitude towards Russia since his election. How much this is a question of style or substance we shall see below.

The third area where Hungary might try to have an impact after the accession to the EU is the realm of human rights and, more specifically, minority rights. Since 1990, successive Hungarian governments have repeatedly used European and other international fora to express dissatisfaction with the treatment of Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries. The government may now choose to use the EU's common security policy to channel its concerns. If so – and if Hungary succeeds in convincing other member states of the validity of its position – Budapest's voice would be significantly amplified. By nature, multilateral negotiations led by the European Union would also dampen the emotional impact of claims pursued single-handedly by Hungary as well as the verbal "radicalism" of claims. However, past Hungarian experience with raising its national concerns at the EU level has been frustrating; the government's attempts at strengthening minority rights in the proposed European constitutional debate, in particular, must have been highly educational in their ultimate futility.

THE POLICY PROCESS AND THE MAJOR PLAYERS

Hungary is a parliamentary republic with medium-weak president and a strong prime ministerial government. A number of important consequences follow from this broad regime-level definition. Although the president of the republic serves as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces in war, he has no independent political bearing on the formulation or execution of defense and security policies, and no place in the peacetime military chain of command (the arrangement is the product of a long-running conflict between the president and the prime minister in the early 1990s, eventually settled by a constitutional court ruling). As a result, all the important actors responsible for planning and implementation of security policies report to the prime minister.

The prime minister holds considerable powers across all areas, even by international standards. The institution of the constructive vote of no confidence

³ Dunay: *Az EU közös biztonság- és védelempolitikájának céltalansága: a tagságra váró országok nézőpontja* [The aimlessness of ESDP the view from the accession countries], pp. 26-28.

⁴ Speech of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the tasking conference of the Defense Forces on March 1, 2001; <http://www.honvedelem.hu/cikk.php?cikk=717t>.

makes it very unlikely (barring extreme political disasters) that a prime minister will not serve his or her full term of four years. As the prime minister personally selects his government, all ministers owe their position ultimately to him alone. In fact, some observers pointed out years ago that the powers of the Hungarian prime minister are comparable to the German chancellor. Like his German counterpart, the head of the government in Budapest benefits from the organizational support provided by the Office of the Prime Minister; in effect the counterpart to the federal chancellor's office – a ministry level governmental unit, which in many ways has come to dominate the other departments.

The national security cabinet consists of the minister of defense (chair), the minister of interior, the minister of justice, the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of the Prime Minister's Office, and the undersecretary of the Prime Minister's Office responsible for national security affairs. This body is the top policy-making unit in the executive domain responsible both for defining broad policy outlines and for the day-to-day management of national security affairs. This is also the ultimate clearing-house for the final products of the intelligence community. The threat assessments of the different intelligence agencies are also collated and harmonized at this body.

The legislative, too, enjoys significant say in the national security policy-making process. In addition to the "power of the purse" – already considerable because of the costs of military modernization – it also takes part in formulating the military and security doctrines, which must be approved in the form of a parliamentary resolution. Most of the legislative work is carried out in the national security and foreign policy committees. These also serve as the main channels of providing important national security information to opposition parties through hearings and closed sessions.

However, the major players in the process are the executive agencies represented in the national security cabinet and the Prime Minister's Office itself. In the centre-right government of Viktor Orbán the primacy of the "chancellery" was even more pronounced, since all major portfolios were supervised on behalf of the prime minister by personal "referents" within the Prime Minister's Office. Thus the minister of defense, for example, had considerably less policy-autonomy than in previous or later governments. The reasons for this concentration of power were political in nature and were induced by the needs to manage the ruling coalition (about which more will be said later). Though the position of the "referents" was abolished by the Medgyessy government, and thus the level of ministerial autonomy was again increased, the prime minister remains the dominant player in all issues on which he chooses to concentrate. Delegation is the privilege of the premier.

The most important institutional actor is arguably the Ministry of Defense. It is the primary vehicle of the reform of the armed forces, which broadly follow two major directions. One of these is the re-integration of the Defense Forces into the ministry and changing the command structure so as to reduce the number of headquarters. The other is the reduction of peacetime personnel, which was carried out mostly by 2001. It is not entirely clear at the moment what would be the net effect of the new public sector austerity program on the armed forces. Imre Iváncsik, the state secretary for political affairs in the Ministry of Defense claimed on February 4, 2004 that the budgetary cuts will not impede the ongoing reform of the defense force structure. The ministry still envisages that by 2013 Hungary will have a small, professional rapid reaction force with high survivability.⁵ The peacetime strength is envisaged at 36,000 with a 50-60% expansion of personnel in wartime. The modernization effort made imperative the upgrading of military hardware as well. The relative expansion of the military budget in the 2000-2002 period made room for some important investments. The largest of those was the lease of the Gripen supersonic fighters from Sweden (the choice of the Gripen over the F-16s caused a temporary but perceptible chilling in the bilateral relations with the United States).

The reform plans are heavily back-loaded with the bulk of the equipment modernization only expected in the third phase (2007-2010) of the 10-year cycle of the transformation of the defense forces.⁶ With most procurement yet to be made, Defense Minister Ferenc Juhász announced on the same date that he signed an agreement with his UK counterpart, Geoffrey Hoon, for Britain to monitor and advise Hungary on the defense transformation process. The agreement, reached on the sidelines of the Munich security policy conference, prompted Juhász to claim that Hungarian modernization efforts enjoy UK and U.S. support and could serve as a model for new NATO members.⁷ Whether Hungary is truly a showcase is a debatable assertion. Nevertheless, the agreement demonstrated that Hungary has travelled far from the days when it was branded an underperforming ally by Foreign Affairs magazine before the Prague NATO summit in 2002.⁸

⁵ <http://www.honvedelem.hu/cikk.php?cikk=15307>.

⁶ See also the section on Hungary by Erzsébet Nagyné Rózsa in Missiroli, A. (ed.): *Bigger EU, Wider CFSP, Stronger ESDP? The View from Central Europe*. ISS Occasional Papers No. 34, April 2002, pp 39-40.

⁷ http://www.radio.hu/index.php?cikk_id=75200.

⁸ Wallender, C. A.: *NATO's Price*. Foreign Affairs, November-December 2002, Vol. 81, No. 6.

DOMESTIC POLITICS AND SECURITY POLICY

How do the policy processes outlined above work in the context of the Hungarian political landscape? And how do the formal threat assessments produced by the Hungarian government relate to the perceptions of the socio-political elite and the general public?

The most important fact about public perceptions of security threats is their almost complete absence from public consciousness. This is true of almost any issue that relates to the international environment of the country. Among the 15 most important political issues covered by the Hungarian media in January 2004, there was not a single item that would even indirectly relate to international or security affairs – and the 15th received only 2% of the media coverage!⁹ If we take media presence to be a proxy for the general interest in political issues, we can safely claim that security and foreign affairs are generally out of sight of most Hungarian voters. This is further corroborated by the fact that during the last three campaigns before general elections these issues were almost entirely neglected by all parties that eventually entered the parliament.

Some security concerns do linger. Although the government rightly de-emphasized potential threats to Hungary (at least from state actors), the general public remains undeniably concerned. Though this is far from unique in the region, there is one aspect that distinguishes the Hungarian case from Poland or the Czech Republic: here the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s left their visible mark. The Hungarian public remains wary of existing or potential conflicts among the southern Slavs. However, after the fall of the Milosevic regime in Serbia and Montenegro, public anxiety about outside threats reached a post-Cold War low.¹⁰

The relatively low public interest in security issues is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it gives considerable leeway to the political elite – and most importantly the government – in shaping its foreign and security policy without grass-roots pressures. On the other hand the very same lack of concern also threatens to undermine the popular legitimacy of the broad strategic outlook of the Hungarian state. This is one of the possible interpretations of the low turnout in the two referenda on joining NATO (1997) and the European Union (2003). In both cases the percentage of the “yes” vote was very high (85.3% for

NATO in 1997; 83.8% for the EU in 2003) but less than half of the eligible voters bothered to participate (49.2% in 1997; 45.6% in 2003). Had it not been for the change in the constitution in 1997, both referenda would have been invalid (in fact, the rules on referenda were changed with an eye to the looming NATO referendum¹¹). Lack of interest among the general public also helps explain why foreign and security policies are almost entirely absent from election campaigns. They confer no electoral bonus, which means that parties usually have no interest in inserting security into the campaign agenda. Only the fringes of the political spectrum – the Workers' Party (Munkáspárt, extreme left) and the Hungarian Life and Justice Party (MIÉP, extreme right) – bring up the 19th century notion of full national sovereignty or military independence and neutrality. MIÉP seems to be calculating that reference to neutrality, a notion popularized during the 1956 revolution, might translate into nostalgia votes. However, it had little success with its agenda in the last three elections.

On the other hand, the lack of public interest (and, *a fortiori*, a lack of campaign focus on such themes) may engender an unfounded sense of broad political consensus among the mainstream political parties. Each time an external event prompts rapid government reaction – such as during the Kosovo and Iraq crises – the opposition party seizes the opportunity to criticize some aspects of the government policy even though it may be in general agreement with the broad security and foreign policy orientation of the government of the day. Voices of dissent regularly make the major governing party jumpy, and accusations of deliberately undermining the “national consensus” fly across the floor in the parliament and in the media. Partisan disagreement on national security issues in a tense situation usually comes as a surprise to both sides exactly because of the low salience of these issues in “normal” times. In other words, the broad consensus often turns out to be an illusion.

The Hungarian party system has evolved basically around one major cleavage: relation to the communist/socialist past (even the terminology would be indicative of party affiliation in this area). This type of left/right divide is far from unique in the region. What makes it particular is the low fragmentation of the party system. There are only two effective political entities now in the Hungarian parliament each with a small satellite party. This is partly due to the constitutional setup and the electoral system, but it also owes much to the consistent efforts of the dominant centre-right party, FIDESZ, who spent enor-

⁹ *Medián* monthly review, January 2004; http://www.median.hu/kutatasok/szemle_2004/Haviszemle_jan.pdf.

¹⁰ See the piece of Pál Dunay in Missiroli, A. (ed.): *Enlargement and European Defence after 11 September*. Chailiot Papers No. 53, June 2002.

¹¹ For the details of the referenda and the legal background see the webpage of the National Election Office, Hungary (<http://www.valasztas.hu/>).

mous energy on turning their party into the quasi-hegemon on the right of the political spectrum. This level of concentration on the right is what makes the party system unique in the region.

Although FIDESZ's foreign and security policy preferences do not necessarily diverge much from the ruling Socialists, the party tends to wrap all its security decisions in the cloak of *national interest*. The rhetoric plays an important role in keeping together the otherwise very heterogeneous group of voters that make up the right of the political spectrum, which also includes a number of Euro-skeptics and voters with an anti-Western/anti-American general disposition (its core, however, is built of middle-of-the-road centrist conservatives, whose outlook is more internationalist and western oriented). The rhetorical juggling routinely performed by FIDESZ carries its dangers as rhetoric and style sometimes equal content in diplomacy. It is little surprise that the otherwise pro-American-leaning Orbán government, near the end of its term, found itself falling out of grace of the U.S. administration.

At another level party politics may still exert some influence on security and foreign policy issues. Although 14 years of political history of the Third Republic does not allow us to speak of strong political traditions, one clear tendency has emerged. During coalition negotiations, the major government party strives to retain monopoly over the portfolios relating directly to military, security and foreign affairs. With one exception, this was always achieved. In the 1998-2002 centre-right government the minister of defense, János Szabó, was a member of the minor coalition partner, the Smallholders Party (FGKP). His less-than-professional conduct in the office proved a headache for the then-prime minister, Viktor Orbán, particularly because Hungary was about to join NATO. Given this experience, it is quite unlikely that the dominant coalition party will in the future trade away control over national security portfolios, at least in the next few elections. The tendency toward an effective two-party system (with the share of the smaller parties' seats in the parliament falling constantly) in itself works against the Szabó scenario; defense and foreign affairs will most likely go to seasoned politicians of the major governing parties.

The general absence of checks and balances in national security decision-making also creates conditions for ill-advised policies to persist and flourish. Critics of the Medgyessy government pointed to the lack of outside political input as the possible reason for the Hungarian government's decision to support the Polish stance on voting rights in the European Convention talks. In exchange, Poland promised to support the Hungarian request for a clause on minority rights to be included in the European Constitution. This attempt at packaging two issues with a minimal chance of winning a majority could at best

be read as "intransigence" by some in the core – and it may not be the ideal policy for a country of Hungary's size.¹²

Though the security consensus at critical times proves to be more tenuous than it might appear at first glance, the odds are that the next government of Hungary will share the general strategic outlook and the foreign policy priorities of the previous governments, regardless of who forms the government in 2006. Hungary will remain a "reflex Atlanticist" with no particular enthusiasm towards the second pillar of European integration, but will participate in its development as long as it does not force a choice between her European and Atlantic commitments.

¹² *Felebarátok közt [Among half-friends]*. HVG, 2003, Vol. 25, No. 48.