

The Half-Hearted Transformation of the Hungarian Military

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ABSTRACT *The paper analyses the few successes and many failures of the defence reform of Hungary since the system change of 1990. It concludes that the failures have been due to objective reasons. Namely, due to the multiple changes that had to be carried out in politics, economy and the society the defence sector has been losing out in a largely threat-free environment. The shortage of human and financial resources is aggravated by the subjective mistakes, including waste and corruption. The difficulties Hungary has been facing—similarly to most countries in East–Central Europe—point to a pertinent question: why have defence reforms failed in most cases in the new democracies generally?*

When historians look back to the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War they will most probably conclude that the transition of Hungary was among the most successful. After severe economic decline the country recovered and by the end of the late 1990s the per capita GDP exceeded that of the late 1980s. Democratic institutions were established and have functioned properly in most cases. The support of the population for liberal democracy has increased and has no alternative. This irreversible development has been recognised by the West and its institutions. Between 1990 and 2004 Hungary joined a number of Euroatlantic institutions, ranging from the Council of Europe (1990), the OECD (1996), NATO (1999) and the European Union (EU) (2004). The grass root integration of the country has brought even more results than formal membership. Since the beginning of 2000 the EU has accounted for approximately three-quarters of Hungary's total exports. This is higher than the share of intra-EU exports of 13 of the 15 member-states which belonged to the EU before May 2004.¹

In spite of these successes, however, a number of problems remain in several areas. In particular, the capacity of the public sector has not developed sufficiently to make implementation and enforcement of laws particularly easy. Levels of corruption are still higher than in most Western European countries,

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and the country is ranked only as number three in the Central and Eastern European region on Transparency International's Corruption Perception index.² Those governmental portfolios that were not in the forefront of the system change or of a low political priority are in a particularly disadvantageous situation and have been the main losers of the past decade and a half of change. There is certainly a case for including the Ministry of Defence in this.

This situation is further aggravated by Hungary's 'unique' military tradition. Over the past five centuries the armed forces of Hungary have achieved victory three times. Once in 1487 when King Matthias's troops occupied Vienna. A second time in 1991 when the forty member strong Hungarian medical team integrated in the British component 'won' the Gulf War. Hungary could also record victory in Kosovo as a new member of the Alliance. Beyond this, Hungary fought two world wars on the losing side and its role was reduced to that of a military springboard in the southern tier of the Warsaw Pact. In 1956 when the Hungarian people violently resisted Soviet occupation and Communist Party rule, the armed forces spontaneously dissolved and took no side in the conflict. Thereafter the Hungarian armed forces were not trusted, either by the political elite, or the Soviet leadership.

This disinterest had some surprisingly positive consequences, however. First, the defence minister was never a full member of the Politburo of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP). This allowed some room for a limited professionalism ethos to develop in the armed forces. Second, the limited strategic unimportance of the country made heavy military investment unnecessary. Hungary was under much less pressure in this respect than the countries of the northern tier of the Warsaw Pact. Finally, these factors played into the hands of those who tried to carry out limited defence reform in the mid-1980s, in particular in relation to the ensuring that the military was not too great a drain on the state finances. As a consequence, defence budgets declined steadily from 1987 through to 1997.

In Hungary the system change of 1989 came about through an accord between the opposition movements/parties and the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (the Communist Party). Due to the nature of the change dramatic events were largely missing in the process. Hence the system change was dominated by compromise and could be characterised as a 'negotiated revolution'.³ The 32 years of the Kádár era (1956–88), often described as the period of 'goulash communism' tried to avoid the alienation of large population groups and the 'heroization' of the tiny active opposition. The regime incorporated the overwhelming majority of the population under the slogan of 'those who are not against us are with us'. Hence it would have been contrary to the nature of Hungarian historical development had there been radical expulsions from the society on the basis of the past. Due to these factors the system change did not represent a particularly sharp divide and was not followed by 'lustration' either in the political class or in the military leadership.⁴

Democratic Control of the Armed Forces

Constitutional and Institutional Restructuring

The main constitutional and institutional changes in the political system were brought about by an extensive constitutional revision in the autumn of 1989. This has provided the framework for the development of Hungarian civil–military relations ever since. Under the modified constitution the roles of the different enforcement agencies are clearly defined. Thus, the ‘fundamental duty of the armed forces (the Hungarian Army and Border Guard) is the military defence of the country’. Within the ambit of its policing activities, the border guard shall guard the borders of the country, control border traffic, and maintain order on the borders (Art. 40/A para. (1)). The ‘fundamental task of the police is to maintain public safety and internal order’ (Art. 40/A, para. (2)).

This institutional arrangement is similar to many other democracies. The President of the Republic ‘is Chief of the armed forces’ (Art. 29). The Parliament is entitled to decide on ‘the declaration of a state of war and the conclusion of peace’, ‘the deployment of the armed forces both abroad and within the country’. It can ‘establish the National Defence Council, in the case of war, or imminent danger of armed attack by a foreign power’ (Art. 19, para. (3), subpara-s g), j) and h)). In peace-time it is the government that ‘directs the operation of the armed forces and of the police and other security organs’ (Art. 35, para. (1), subpara. h)). Partly as a consequence of political priorities in 1989, the constitutional revision emphasised the authority of the legislature over the executive in relation to the armed forces and defence policy. In practice this has had a somewhat negative impact on the effectiveness of decision-making in this area.

In particular, there are a number of constitutional constraints on the deployment of the Hungarian armed forces beyond its national borders. The Constitution stated that with ‘the exception of military manoeuvres carried out according to international treaties and peacekeeping missions upon request of the United Nations, the armed forces may only cross the country’s borders with the prior consent of the Parliament’ (Art. 40/B, para. (1)). This rule of course deprived the country’s military leadership of some flexibility from time to time, particularly since its accession to NATO in 1999. As a consequence there have been a number of attempts to try and modify this element of the Constitution to allow Hungary to become more actively and flexibly involved in the activities of the Alliance.⁵ An attempted modification of the Constitution failed in December 1998 for reasons entirely unrelated to the matter of the country’s forthcoming NATO membership. As a consequence, the constitution gave no room for flexibility for sending Hungarian military personnel abroad on NATO assignment. Although there was pressure to revise these rules, the government was in no hurry to do so. Indeed, it required the direct intervention of then NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson to kick start the process.⁶ This led to a long awaited modification of the constitution ‘in order to guarantee the

carrying into effect of allied commitments' and accordingly the 'government approves the employment of Hungarian or foreign armed forces . . . on the basis of the decision of the North Atlantic Council and other troop movements on the basis of the decision of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation'.⁷ This has eliminated an important obstacle to the effective interoperability of the Hungarian armed forces.

De-politicisation/De-communisation of the Military

Hungary went through a gradual transformation from communism and hence, contrary to other central and eastern European countries, no forced retirement or 'lustration' occurred in the armed forces. There would have been no particular reason for it as it was clear to all involved that the military would not resist the change. Where military resistance to reform has occurred, this has been sporadic and not of a political nature.

The constitutional and legal foundations for civilian control over the military existed early in the process of the system change. Indeed, as 'Bonapartism' has never been an issue in the modern history of the country, the core issue of ensuring civilian control over the military was not as pressing in Hungary as elsewhere in the postcommunist region. Even before 1989, the constitution stated that 'Professional members of the armed forces, the police and the civil national security services may not be members of political parties and may not engage in political activities' (Art. 40/B, para. (4)). Since then this provision has largely been adhered to, though some serving military personnel have campaigned for parliamentary office, only to resign from their posts once elected.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the government were formally deprived of playing a dominant role in the command of the armed forces as part of Hungary's system for civilian control over the military. This was reflected in the separation of the MoD and the General Staff that took place on 1 December 1989. However, these changes also resulted in the development of parallel structures and a doubling of military bureaucracy. The management of military affairs was badly affected. Eventually, considerations related to effectiveness prevailed and this mistake was repaired. However, it took more than a decade to reunite the two entities and re-subordinate the General Staff to the MoD.⁸ Furthermore, practitioners and insiders complain that formal ratification has been followed by painstakingly slow steps towards the merger of institutional structures. Continuing rivalries have resulted in the continuing existence of a virulent defence bureaucracy.

'Second Generation' Challenges in Civil–military Relations

Perhaps the most important issue for the quality of Hungarian civil–military relations is the nature of the interaction between civilians and military

professionals in the defence sector—in particular in relation to defence planning. In practical terms, this is a far more significant issue than questions of constitutional redrafting and the ‘de-communisation’ of the armed forces. This situation has evolved significantly since 1990, but a number of really quite fundamental shortcomings remain.

Hungary as a new democracy could not immediately install a competent class of civilians in the MoD to support the civilian political leadership directly after the system change. The armed forces were suspicious of the few civilians who had acquired expertise in the field of defence. The fact that most Western support in training and retraining was offered to military professionals also contributed to a slow development of civilian expertise. The professional superiority of the military in defence matters, as declared by the military itself, was politically damaging. Military professionals retained significant influence on decision making inside the MoD. At the same time, the weakened civilian leadership of the ministry could not credibly represent military interests at the political (governmental and parliamentary) level. However, these difficulties did not just result from the fact that civilian expertise in defence matters was insufficient. To a significant degree, they also reflected a lack of military competence in these areas as well, particularly in relation to strategic defence planning. During the communist period, Hungary had been strategically subordinated to the Soviet High Command within the Warsaw Pact and hence had had no genuine strategic culture of its own for at least four decades. After the system change, these deficiencies meant that the Hungarian military itself was significantly lacking in expertise in these areas, and was ill-equipped to shape the country’s new defence policy. As a consequence, for much of the 1990s, Hungarian civil–military relations were characterised by two largely incompetent groups facing each other: the new civilians in the defence sector and the old military ‘professionals’.

In the 15 years that have passed since the system change, these challenges of coexistence and cooperation have resulted in a number of tensions. The civilians have often looked down on the military professionals and tried to reduce their autonomy, even in those areas where they had clear competence—such as military-technical matters. The military in turn have tried to present as many issues as possible as falling within their own sphere of exclusive competence.

This ‘cats and dogs game’ has been going on for some time with the strength of one group *vis-à-vis* the other varying over time. At certain times the increasing influence of the military has led to the ‘re-militarisation’ of the defence establishment whereas on other occasions civilians influence was maximised. The period of the Socialist-Liberal Horn, Medgyessy and Gyurcsány governments (1994–8 and 2002–4 and 2004–, respectively), for example, were characterised by a process of ‘re-militarisation’ whereas the two conservative cabinets (1990–4, 1998–2002) proved more determined to civilianise the defence ministry. The Socialist-Liberal position has been understandable, although not acceptable, and results from the traditionally

good relationship that the Socialist Party maintained with the armed forces during the 'communist' period. In the main therefore, the process of developing the professional civilian component of Hungary's defence sector has been set back each time a Socialist-Liberal government has been elected. Despite this, however, there is a chance that increasing competence on both sides of the civil-military divide in the Hungarian defence sector may result in a more balanced relationship between the leadership of the MoD and the General Staff in the long run. Partly as a consequence of these difficulties, Hungary has continued to lag behind international expectations in relation to its defence reforms. Perhaps most importantly, it has been slow to develop a modern military establishment, conscious of its tasks and responsibilities and with a clear vision for the future.

Human factors have also played an important role. For the first 12 years of the Republic of Hungary's existence, the post of defence minister tended to be offered as compensation or part of a political deal. As a consequence, the persons selected for the post often had no competence or even particular interest in this field. Moreover their position was generally weak in the political establishment more broadly. For example, the first minister, Lajos Für (1990-4) was appointed to the post in compensation for not being elected president of the republic. György Keleti (1994-8) became defence minister because he had been the press spokesman of the MoD and had been directly elected in the first round of the elections with a convincing majority. Although he had no proper military experience (he used to work in press matters and at the party committee of the MoD) he had fair knowledge of the ministry. His own interpretation of his role was to contribute to the Hungarian state's budget balance and not to present excessive financial demands to the Finance Ministry. János Szabó (1998-2002) became the Minister of Defence at the last minute. He belonged to the junior coalition partner in the new government—the Smallholders' Party—which demonstrated mass incompetence across all the portfolios for which it was responsible. In addition, on many occasions, the Prime Minister systematically violated the decision-making autonomy of the Minister of Defence enshrined in the Law on National Defence.

In the wake of the 2002 parliamentary elections, this situation has at last changed. Even before the elections took place, it was clear that irrespective of which major party formed the government, the Minister of Defence would be a politician with a genuine interest in defence matters for the first time. So it happened. The new Socialist Minister of Defence, Mr Ferenc Juhász had been a member of the parliamentary defence committee for eight years, and its vice-president for four. In spite of this, his lack of bureaucratic experience has handicapped his performance and in practical terms his achievements have been small. The defence minister faced three major challenges during the first two years of his office term: first, defence reform; second, tackling corruption in the defence sector; and finally fulfilling his personal aspirations. In each case the results have been disappointing: defence reform has eaten up much time

without bringing the long awaited breakthrough in the performance of the Hungarian armed forces; rumours persist that corruption has not continued in the MoD and the Defence Minister himself has been implicated; and Juhász's own ambitions to become leader of the Socialist Party have proved to be unrealistic. As a consequence, it seems that the chaos of the defence sector will continue in the years to come.

The role of the Hungarian parliament in defence matters has been very similar to its equivalents in the better established democracies. The difference is not in the formal rules governing parliamentary oversight, but rather in the practical functioning of these bodies. For example, despite the fact several MPs have held their positions since the early days of Hungarian democracy and have been members of the defence committee for more than one legislative period, their competence in defence matters have not reached desirable levels. This has been due partly to the relatively little attention paid to defence matters by both the government and parliamentarians. This in turn has reflected both the largely threat-free geostrategic environment that Hungary finds itself in, as well as Hungarian society's traditional lack of interest in defence issues.⁹ Nevertheless, Hungary's increasing participation in international military operations—over which parliament had and to a lesser extent still has real influence—has recently forced defence matters higher up the parliamentary agenda.

Professionalisation and Military Reform

When Hungary started its transition in the late 1980s it was clear there were many other items on its political and economic agenda that were far more important than the transformation of the defence sector. As far as the new political elite were concerned, the key issue relating to the military was that it would not intervene in the political process. Once it became clear that this was uncontestedly the case their interest in further defence reform issues declined significantly and priority was instead given to the issue of institution building. The Antall government—Hungary's first after the system change—performed very well in this respect and made good progress in establishing civilian control over the military and clarifying constitutional arrangements for civil–military relations. In addition, the Antall government was also clearly—though understandably at this point primarily symbolically—committed to the idea of the NATO integration and made no secret of the fact to its Western partners. Understandably, this commitment remained primarily symbolic for most of the early 1990s and NATO itself gave little indication of its willingness to accept Hungary into the Alliance. As a consequence, it was enough for Hungary to demonstrate a strong desire to join NATO at the levels of declaratory policy and diplomacy alone and it did not translate into practical defence reform or modernisation efforts. In contrast, the launch of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme during the last months of the new government's office in 1994

offered the real prospect of potential NATO accession at some future point. Significantly, PFP also made clear that the modernisation of applicants' defence sectors would be an indispensable precondition of NATO integration, if not necessarily of membership.

When the Socialist-Liberal Horn government came into power in 1994, it was preoccupied with more pressing matters than defence reform. These included the consolidation of the economic situation, including the introduction of the so-called Bokros austerity package in March 1995, and resolving foreign policy tensions with Romania and Slovakia. In relation to the defence sector, the Horn cabinet apparently started out from the mistaken assumption that NATO accession would not occur any time soon. Hence, they believed that the best contribution the defence sector could make to the country's reform process would be to ensure that it did not undermine the shaky balance of the national economy. In terms of policy they followed the pattern of their predecessors, further shrinking the defence budget and introducing different military reform plans so swiftly that they had no practical chance of putting them into practice. The few important steps were taken were done so in order to meet the expectations of the world at large, and particularly those of NATO and its member-states. These included the establishment of a coordination mechanism to prepare for NATO accession. After NATO actually issued its invitation to Hungary in the summer of 1997, the Horn government demonstrated little more determination in relation to reforming the defence sector. This was because it believed the accession process would be motivated primarily on the basis of a political decisions rather than Hungary's military-technical performance.¹⁰ In addition, by this time new elections were looming which served to delay the introduction of any major new policy initiatives in this area.

A new government—under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—was formed in the summer of 1998. However, despite the fact that Hungary was due to accede to NATO only a few months later, defence reform initially remained a low priority. This was primarily because of the continuing lukewarm attitude of the majority of the population towards defence matters and the consequent political prioritisation of other policy areas. Nevertheless, the Orbán government did initiate two important positive developments in relation to Hungary's defence reforms. First, it played a constructive and cooperative role with other members of NATO during the Kosovo operation in Spring 1999. Second, after the conflict it introduced a long-term and fairly comprehensive defence reform plan, which despite certain shortcomings was practical to implement.¹¹

For two reasons it had become clear that Hungary's defence reform could not be postponed further. First, considerable pressure had built up over the need to transform a defence structure which absorbed major resources, without contributing greatly to the defence capability and the international reputation of the country. The disruption caused by the Hungarian government's decision to send one battalion to the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) in July 1999, for

example, highlighted the financial fragility of the Hungarian defence budget. The second pressure for reform was international, and stemmed from the need for the government to demonstrate it could shoulder the burden of NATO membership. Specific Hungarian deficiencies were highlighted during the Kosovo crisis, when, after Serbian planes had violated Hungarian airspace, the air force had to rely on NATO allies to patrol its airspace due to the absence of NATO standard Identification Friend or Foe system on Hungarian Mig 29s.

In the summer of 2000 the parliament approved a plan for the long-term transformation of the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF). The process was divided into three phases between 2000 and 2010. During the first phase the emphasis of the reform was on the transition to the new structure, relocation of troops, the establishment of adequate proportions of personnel strength, the creation of the basis for reducing operational costs and costs of maintenance, improvement of living and working conditions, and the establishment of a minimum level of NATO interoperability. The second phase from 2003 to 2006, would pursue programmes to improve the quality of life, combat capability and training of the HDF. Until the end of this phase the armed forces would essentially operate on the basis of existing—though in some cases upgraded—equipment. Phase three from 2006 to 2010 aimed at the modernisation of equipment in accordance with capability requirements, and the demands of increased NATO compatibility and interoperability. Unfortunately however, this fairly comprehensive plan had no chance to be implemented as the Orbán government lost the elections in the spring of 2002.

From the beginning of the new government's period in office, it was obvious that the sharply divided establishment would take over as little of the legacy of the conservative cabinet as possible. There were two apparent shortcomings of the defence reform plan. Namely, it intended to maintain a mass army, even though much smaller than before. This was closely associated with the insistence of the Orbán cabinet upon maintaining conscription for a longer period of time. For his own ideological reasons, Orbán himself was determined to maintain conscription. For many, Orbán's reasoning on this issue was difficult to fathom, particularly since the service time of conscripts had been reduced to only six months at the beginning of 2002, which made any military utility they may have had highly questionable. Furthermore, conscript soldiers were constitutionally forbidden from participating in any international missions. This meant that in practice there were two separate armies inside the HDF. In the framework of selective development a few units were prepared for international operations whereas the others were sustained on a low level of preparedness and equipment. This was understandable temporarily and meant that Hungarian contributions drawn from elite units performed fairly well in international operations such as Bosnia and Kosovo. In practical terms this policy meant that Hungary combined an unreformed mass army with some pockets of a modern armed force.

One of the major shortcomings of the Orbán government's period in office was that they did not foresee that NATO accession would greatly increase the foreign policy significance of the defence sector and raise the importance of the MoD as a conduit for cooperation with the Alliance. The new significance of the MoD required a leadership that in particular would be able to communicate the (few) achievements of the Hungarian defence sector to NATO and its members and also explain and generate understanding of its shortcomings. In practice, however, the MoD leadership was not up to this important task, a situation that resulted in poor communication with NATO at the highest level and complemented the generally weak performance of the Hungarian defence sector within the Alliance.

When the Socialist-Liberal coalition government was formed under Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy in May 2002 there were hopes that the professional competence of the new Minister of Defence would make a difference in this area. Indeed, one of his first decisions on coming into office was to order a review of the defence capabilities of the Hungarian defence sector. Perhaps most significantly, he announced a plan to abolish conscription in 2005 and further reduce the number of military facilities.¹² This is a major difference from the policy of the Orbán government as it means that conscription will be abolished during the term of office of the current administration. While this may still be too little too late, it *will* mean that the HDF's 'two armies' will gradually shrink to one and that professionalism in the entire armed forces will prevail. The current reform process does still remain threatened by potential political compromises and 'technical failures' however. In relation to the latter, for example, the successful establishment of a clear career structure for professional officers is of great importance. If this does not occur, then it is likely that the younger, more active, and competitive military professionals—who are the HDFs brightest hope for the future—will quickly leave the armed forces. In their place, the military risks being left with 'an armada of lieutenant colonels'.¹³ Nevertheless, despite all the potential shortcomings associated with abolishing conscription and establishing professional armed forces, this policy initiative may well prove to be the single most important achievement of the Socialist-Liberal government's defence reform programme. Given the gross unpopularity of compulsory military service in Hungary it is also a step that will most likely prove to be irreversible.

As well as implementing its plans for abolishing conscription, the Medgyessy-led coalition has also introduced its own three phase defence reform plan. The first phase, which will run until the end of 2006 will concentrate on personnel and training reform in the HDF. This will involve closing several units and facilities (including the Pécs artillery brigade, the training facilities at Szabadszállás and the Savaria training centre at Szombathely) and relocating others (such as the air defence missile regiment and the combat helicopter regiment).¹⁴ There will also be a reduction in the number of officers, which will have a positive impact on the officer to NCO ration in the HDF. In addition,

the reform plan will concentrate on properly preparing and equipping those units which will be offered to NATO assignments, and redundant armament and materiel will be withdrawn from service. During the second phase, between 2006 and 2010, the modernisation process will continue. Fighting units will continue to be re-equipped with new vehicles, armaments and materiel while the number of military facilities will be reduced by a further 20%. In phase three, between 2010 and 2013, the reform envisages the completion of the qualitative development of the HDF—including the living and working conditions of military personnel—to full NATO standards.

Debates continue to surround the elaboration of the defence reform. Opposition parties, which still attribute more importance to the individual defence of national territory than the Socialist-Liberal government, insisted upon maintaining organisations of mobilisation and territorial defence. This is an option that has been rejected by the government, partly due to the clear absence of external threat, and partly due to Hungary's membership of NATO which it argues makes the individual self-defence of national territory unnecessary. The two opposition parties are also of the view that the amount Hungary is prepared to commit to peace operations should be determined as a percentage of the defence budget. This would in practice limit the amount that could be spent on peacekeeping missions for the HDF, while protecting resources for their 'core' mission of individual and collective self-defence. This proposal was rejected by the government on the basis that it violated its legally enshrined right to approve the HDF's participation in NATO peace operations.¹⁵ Perhaps more significantly, however, had Hungary's ability to contribute to peace operations been constrained it would have deprived the country of its most valuable contribution to international security and its participation in the Atlantic Alliance. In contrast to the military's practically non-existent defence of national territory role for example, there are currently 964 Hungarian personnel on international assignment. The four largest missions are the transportation battalion and headquarters component in Iraq (295), KFOR (266), SFOR (142) and UNFICYP in Cyprus (122).¹⁶

Despite these reforms however, there appears to be little understanding in the MoD leadership that the changes associated with professionalising the HDF might require a different philosophy than before. The previous practice of differentiating between units and investing in some of them at the expense of others cannot be sustained for example. Furthermore, the communication problems that characterised the MoD under the Orbán government have continued, albeit on a somewhat reduced scale. This burdens communication with NATO and has increased the external pressure that has been mounting on the Hungarian defence sector over the past two years. Similarly, while the government has committed itself to increasing military expenditure from 1.71% of GDP in 2004 to a 1.81% in 2006 (to be sustained for the following 10 years)¹⁷, in practice this may not be enough to significantly ease the defence

sector's current constrained financial situation. Moreover, as Sebestyén Gorka stated in 2004, 'the root problem is not funding but waste and corruption. The budget is big enough to create a decent army if it were managed properly.'¹⁸

The Military and Society

The prestige of the armed forces changed significantly since the system change in 1989. This is partly a consequence of the regained independence of the country, which has made the armed forces more of a national institution than before. Hungarian military–society relations remain coloured by the fact that Hungary has no rich military tradition and Hungarians have no tradition of engaging either widely or deeply in defence matters. In practice this means that support for the armed forces in Hungarian society tends to be rather volatile. Thus, when the armed forces' activities are publicly visible, their popularity in society tends to rise. This was the case when they played a key role in fighting the devastating flooding which afflicted the country in 1999 and 2000, as well as before and during NATO's Kosovo operation. In the absence of such events, they generally receive little societal attention or support.¹⁹ The legitimacy of the military in Hungarian society today therefore tends to depend on it being able to constructively fulfil tasks that are perceived to be worthwhile.

It is unlikely that the introduction of a fully professional army by the end of 2005 will 'detach' the Hungarian armed forces from the society. Indeed, in many respects it is likely that Hungarian society would be prouder of a smaller, properly functioning, professional force, than the malfunctioning conscript army of the past 15 years. It is not therefore necessary to compensate for the abolition of conscription by creating territorially composed armed units analogous to the US National Guard. While military service persists, it remains deeply unpopular. Draft dodging continues to be a severe problem and is likely to remain so for the remaining period until the final batch of conscripts are called upon to serve. Conscription in Hungary in its present form is both unworkable and politically unpopular. As a consequence it is likely that its abolition will be welcomed not only by those who are eligible for the draft, but also by the political establishment and the military leadership.

In the absence of radical and unexpected change Hungary can expect to exist in a relatively benign international environment for some time to come. In this regional context, military force is likely to be used primarily for conflict management and peacekeeping operations, and for coercion only exceptionally (and then generally only by the great powers). As the integrated space of Europe expands there is reason to hope that a genuine democratic peace will prevail. This would mean that the challenges to the Hungarian military will appear hundreds, or more likely thousands of kilometres away from the borders of the country rather than on their doorstep as in the past. In such a situation it will continue to be a challenging task to maintain societal support for the defence sector and particularly to guarantee adequate financing.

The current Medgyessy government has promised to adequately fund the armed forces and particularly to reverse the consistently declining funding available for technical modernisation. However, in a benign regional security environment, defence remains a vulnerable policy sector, especially in comparison to those areas which have a more direct bearing upon the economic competitiveness of the country or that influence voting patterns more directly. The armed forces continuing weak legitimacy in society therefore mean that it is likely that they will be the first institution whose funding will be cut in the event of scarcity of state resources. This was already a problem for the defence sector in 2004, when the financial pressures required major cuts in the state budget. The defence ministry was an easy target and lost approximately 12 billion Hungarian forints (US\$ 60 million). In real terms this meant a reduction of approximately 3% in the defence budget for 2004. Scarcity of resources in combination with waste and corruption in the system is a damaging mix that may undermine the performance of the armed forces in the future.

International and Transnational Influences

It is extremely difficult to carry out major, sustained military reform when there is no external threat that would support the allocation of resources to this sector, and when available human resources are limited. Very few countries of the world can escape this dilemma, which applies across the entire spectrum of military activities. Selective development in certain key areas may help but it would require broad consensus in the Hungarian political elite to agree upon those key areas where such development should concentrate.²⁰ Bearing in mind that since the system change each democratically elected government of Hungary has served its office term and none of them have been re-elected, it is also impossible to carry out military reform without broad political consensus. In light of the mutual alienation of the main political forces due to the populist rhetoric of former Prime Minister Orbán and his entourage Hungary will most probably continue to be a difficult case for the rest of NATO, at least as far as its defence sector is concerned.

Hungary's defence reform performance since it has joined NATO has primarily generated disappointment amongst its allies. The United States in particular has been vocal in its criticism. However, to date, Hungary has successfully managed to compensate for its limited reform progress within the Alliance through four main strategies. First, Hungary has been an extremely *loyal* member of the Alliance and has not interfered with the organisation's decision-making process in any measurable way. This position was most clearly visible during the Kosovo operation when decisions were carried out as smoothly with 19 members as they would have been with 16. Hungary also contributed military units to the two major NATO-led peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, SFOR and KFOR. Hungary was also one of the eight states which rallied to the support of the UK and US in 2003 over the issue of military

intervention against Iraq.²¹ Second, Hungary has played an important role within the Alliance simply because of its *location*. Indeed, its position as a neighbour of three of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia including Serbia meant that it was in an especially important position during the Kosovo crisis, providing NATO full access its airspace, airfields and other military facilities whenever necessary. Similarly during the Anglo-American operation in Iraq, Hungary opened its airspace for transit and permitted the training of Iraqi opposition personnel at the Taszár airbase.²² More recently, it expressed its readiness to allow up to 28,000 Iraqi policemen to be trained at the same base. Third, partly because of its strategic location, and partly because of its familiarity with its more strategically important neighbours, Hungary has helped to contribute to the common knowledge of the Alliance. It has also actively cooperated in the field of *intelligence*. Finally, Hungary has managed to compensate for its weak performance in defence reform through the *promises* it has made. It has been extremely skilful in making promises and seldom delivering on them later.²³

Despite these strategies, NATO pressure on Hungary over the defence reform issue has been constant and sometimes public. As a consequence, the government has gradually recognised that there are a number of defence reform issues that it cannot escape from. These include the reduction in the size of the armed forces, the planned reallocation of resources from personnel to investment, equipment modernisation for the HDF, and increasing the proportion of its GDP that is spent on defence. Indeed, on current plans, the HDF will be downsized to less than 30,000 people, will invest more than at any time since 1987 and the defence budget will grow to 1.81% of GDP by 2006.²⁴ Despite the fact that Hungary originally promised to achieve these goals even before it acceded to NATO—late delivery is better than no delivery at all. It is also clear that this would not have been possible at all without steady external pressure on the government to do so.

The changes will result in a situation where the Hungarian armed forces will continue to be able to contribute effectively to international operations. The reorientation of the armed forces has taken place under the assumption that the geostrategic position of the country will not change significantly and that Hungary will not have to take care of its own defence individually. If this set of assumptions proves to be unfounded Hungary will have to reconsider its defence fundamentally. If on the contrary the projections will be realistic then the conclusion can be drawn that a good part of the way has already been taken on the road to defence modernisation.

Notes

¹ The two countries that represent the higher intra-EU export share are the Netherlands and Portugal. Several EU member-states have higher *volume* of intra-EU trade than Hungary, of course. It is remarkable, however, that after the 1 May 2004 enlargement more than 82% of Hungarian exports will be intra-EU.

- ² Hungary used to be second on the list but slipped to third in 2002. Globally, Hungary ranked 31 on the list in 2001, behind Trinidad and Tobago and with Tunisia and only Estonia preceding it from among the transition countries of East-central Europe. In 2002 Hungary slipped to rank 33 together with Malaysia and Trinidad and Tobago, preceded by Slovenia (rank 27) and Estonia (rank 29). In 2003 this trend continued. Hungary ranked number 40 whereas in 2004 number 42. Interestingly its ranking in East–Central Europe did not change. See Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004.
- ³ R. L. Tökés, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- ⁴ There has been a certain 'soft lustration' of the political elite in the sense that those who had held certain political functions or had had access to information of the internal counter-intelligence were screened. If they were found to have held certain political functions they had two choices. Either they had to give up their function or their position would have to be made public. This did not prevent the electorate from voting people who had been affected by this rule into the highest offices.
- ⁵ Lányi Zsolt felszólalása az Oszággyűlés 1998. december 2-i ülésén /The contribution of Zsolt Lányi at the 2 December 1998 session of the National Assembly/. Available at [Http://www.mkogy.hu/internet/plsql/ogy_naplo.naplo.fadat?p_ckl=36p_uln=38p_fe](http://www.mkogy.hu/internet/plsql/ogy_naplo.naplo.fadat?p_ckl=36p_uln=38p_fe) (accessed on 6 September 2004).
- ⁶ In autumn 2003 Lord Robertson publicly named Hungary as a country whose constitutional rules did not allow it to deploy its armed forces on NATO missions. The somewhat unusually specific reference to one NATO member-state prompted a reconsideration of the issue.
- ⁷ 2003. évi CIX. törvény a Magyar Köztársaság Alkotmányáról szóló 1949. évi XX. Törvény módosításáról /Act CIX of 2003 on the modification of Act XX of 1949 on the Constitution of the Republic of Hungary/. Available at <http://www.complex.hu/kzldat/t0300109.htm/t0300109.htm> (accessed on 6 September 2004).
- ⁸ For details of this fascinating story see, 'Civil–military Relations in Hungary: No Big Deal', in Andrew Cottey, Timothy Edmunds & Anthony Forster (eds), *Democratic Control of the Military in Post Communist Europe: Guarding the Guards* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 64–87.
- ⁹ The potential threats emanating from the former Soviet Union, in contrast with many other Central and Eastern European countries, have never had any measurable impact upon the threat perception of the Hungarian public. For details see Ferenc Molnár, 'A közvélemény alakulása a biztonságról és a haderők szerepéről a Cseh Köztársaságban, Lengyelországban és Magyarországon', *Új Honvédségi Szemle*, 54: 8 (August 2000), pp. 4–23.
- ¹⁰ In this respect the Horn government was by and large right. The first post-Cold War enlargement of NATO did not pay particular attention to military preparedness. When at a late stage it did, it simply required that the applicant states increased the share of the state budget that they spent on the military. This fiscal approach did not require any actual improvement of military capabilities, however.
- ¹¹ For more details concerning the reform see 'Hungary', in H. J. Giessmann & G. E. Gustenau (eds), *Security Handbook 2001* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2001), pp. 249–82, 'Hungary: Peace and Quiet of an Increasingly Illiberal Democracy', in D. N. Nelson & U. Markus (eds), *Brassey's Central and Eastern European Security Yearbook* (Washington D.C.: Brassey's, 2002), pp. 85–119, 'Building Professional Competence in Hungary's Defence: Slow Motion', in A. Forster, T. Edmunds & A. Cottey (eds), *The Challenge of Military Reform in Postcommunist Europe* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 63–78.
- ¹² Béla Szilágyi, 'Csak 2005-ben szerel le az utolsó sorkatona' /The last conscript soldier will be discharged in 2005 only/, *Magyar Hírlap*, 13 September 2003.
- ¹³ See Gábor Miklós, Alezredesi ámádia /An armada of lieutenant colonels/, *Népszabadság*, 6 June 2003.
- ¹⁴ See A kormány jóváhagyta a haderőreform terveit /The government approved the military reform plans/, 25 September 2003. Available at <http://www.honvedelem.hu/cikkphp?cikk=14241> (accessed on 6 September 2004); *Népszabadság*, 31 July 2004, p. 7.

- ¹⁵ Iváncsik Imre honvédelmi államtitkár bevezető előadása a Magyar Honvédség hosszú távú fejlesztésének irányairól valamint a Magyar Honvédség részletes bontású létszámáról szóló országgyűlési határozati javaslatok együttes vitájában /Introductory statement of Imre Iváncsik, political state secretary of the MoD, in the joint debate on decision of Parliament on the long term directions of the development of the Hungarian Defence Forces and detailed headcount of the personnel of the Hungarian Defence Forces/ 2 March 2004. Available at http://www.mkoggy.hu/internet/plsql/ogz_naplo_fadat_aktus?p_ckl=37&p_uln=12 (accessed on 6 September 2004).
- ¹⁶ Magyar katonák szerepvállalása a világ békéjének és biztonságának megteremtésében /The role of Hungarian soldiers in creating peace and security in the world/ Last updated on 10 June 2004. Available at http://www.honvedelem.hu/missziok_index.php (accessed on 20 June 2004).
- ¹⁷ A kormány jóváhagyta a haderőreform terveit /The government approved the military reform plans/, 25 September 2003. Available at <http://www.honvedelem.hu/cikkphp?cikk=14241> (accessed on 20 March 2004).
- ¹⁸ Christopher Condon, 'Top brass needs to raise its game: Military spending is likely to rise from 1.5 per cent of GDP but critics say money will be wasted', *Financial Times*, Special Report: Hungary, 1 June 2004, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ See the public opinion poll data presented in Pál Dunay 'The Armed Forces in Hungarian Society: Finding a Role?', in Anthony Forster, Timothy Edmunds & Andrew Cottey (eds), *Soldiers and Societies in Postcommunist Europe: Legitimacy and Change* (Houndmills: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), pp. 84–9.
- ²⁰ The list Hungary presented at the Prague NATO summit in late November 2002 included the improvement of the mobility of the Hungarian Defence Forces, defence against biological and chemical weapons, logistical support to the deployment of the forces of allied powers as well as to guarantee the air refuelling capability of the Gripen aircraft Hungary has purchased. It was not made clear whether Hungary would purchase An-70 transport aircraft or transport capacity will be established in cooperation with other countries. See '30 milliárd forintos magyar felajánlás a NATO-nak' /30 bn forints commitment to NATO/. Available at <http://www.korridor.hu/cikk.php?cikk=10000044877> (accessed on 17 March 2004).
- ²¹ See P. Webster, 'Eight leaders rally 'new' Europe to America's side', *The Times*, 30 January 2003 and A. Applebaum, 'Here Comes the New Europe', *The Washington Post*, 29 January 2003.
- ²² Az iraki partoknál a Taszáron kiképzettek egy csoportja /A group of those trained at Taszar are at the shores of Iraq/ 27 March 2003. Available at http://www.honvedelem.hu/Popup_index.php?type=nyomtat=id (accessed on 30 March 2004).
- ²³ As defence minister Juhász said in an interview the day before the coming into office of the new government 'following NATO accession the country fulfilled 76 per cent of its pledges, 50 per cent a year later and only 26 per cent in 2001'. See Mihály Bak, 'Nem minden vezető marad a helyén a honvédelmi tárcánál—Négyszemközt Juhász Ferencsel' /Not every leader keeps its post at the defence portfolio—Eye to eye with Ferenc Juhász/, *Magyar Hírlap*, 26 May 2002.
- ²⁴ L. 'Védelmi Felülvizsgálat : Uton a XXI. század hadserege felé'. Available at <http://www.honvedelem.hu/cikk.php?cikk=13776> (accessed on 18 March 2004).