

[← Back](#)

# War in the Balkans - Eastern European nations debate merits of NATO's strategy

---

By THERESA AGOVINO April 11, 1999 Publication: Houston Chronicle Page: 29  
Word Count: 947

BUDAPEST, Hungary - The irony is lost on no one.

Just two weeks after finally joining NATO, Hungary, a country whose obsession with national security comes from being pummeled by everyone from the Huns to the Turks to the Germans to the Russians, finds itself the only member of the alliance that borders Yugoslavia.

And if that is not difficult enough, there are about 350,000 ethnic Hungarians living in northern Yugoslavia who reside there as a result of a war that began in the Balkans.

Now Hungary is ensconced in an alliance that is dropping bombs in locations inhabited by members of its extended family.

"It is an unimaginable paradox," said Ildiko Penzes, a 31-year-old English teacher. "Sometimes I think that we are cursed."

Penzes voted for her country to join NATO in a national referendum two years ago. But now she is having second thoughts. She is horrified by the plight of the ethnic Albanians yet disagrees with the bombing campaign, and not simply because of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia.

She wonders whether NATO's mission is well planned and if alliance officials really understand the Balkans.

"I just wanted the security," Penzes said of her vote. "I didn't really give thought to much else. I never thought we would be on the side of the attackers. And there are Hungarians there. It is such a difficult situation. Being in NATO is much deeper than we thought."

All over the world people are debating the merits of the NATO campaign. But the discourse truly resonates in Eastern Europe, a region of NATO neophytes and hopefuls, where people viewed the alliance as a mystical force field against a still lingering fear of Russia, and as a Western stamp of approval for embracing democracy.

Western diplomats worried that Eastern Europeans did not fully comprehend that the promise of security required obligations that can be dangerous and controversial. Now those lessons are abundantly clear, especially in Hungary with its location and ethnic complications.

But it is not just citizens of NATO's newest members who are developing a more realistic picture of the alliance. People in countries excluded from the expansion no longer view NATO with complete admiration.

Indeed, before the Madrid Summit, polls said that between 90 percent and 95 percent of Romanians supported joining NATO. Now, after NATO membership was not offered, a recent poll said that only 11 percent of Romanians believed their country should support NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia.

Romanians are fond of saying they have two good neighbors: the Black Sea and Yugoslavia.

"We are ignoring our loyal friends for a big power that rejects us. This isn't easy. There are concerns it isn't in our national interest," said Stelian Tanase, editor of the monthly magazine World Politics. "One friend is attacking another friend. It makes it complicated to be pro-NATO."

The ethnic nature of conflict in Yugoslavia also disturbs many Romanians because there are about 1.2 million ethnic Hungarians living in their country.

"Does this mean if Hungarians want independence they would bomb Romania?" asked Ioan, a 50-year-old book seller who declined to give his last name. "I don't want NATO anymore."

The notion of NATO intervention in Romania is ludicrous. Romania is a democracy, the

Hungarians are not abused, and the two governments have good relations.

Nonetheless, some fear Romania's far-right parties could play on such fears and create an anti-NATO sentiment before the next round of expansion.

Even if NATO intervention in Romania "seems silly, there are people who talk about it, who want to use it," said Tanase.

The timetable for NATO expansion is unclear, so the government has time to dispel any developing misconceptions about the alliance. But it may be harder to explain NATO's changing role to a population who had a one-dimensional view of the alliance. "I'm not anti-NATO, but I certainly want to think about it more."

Hungary has already made its choice. Most Hungarians are grateful for the security that comes from its NATO status. Still, many criticize the government for not doing enough to help Hungarians in Yugoslavia.

After World War I, which started in Sarajevo, Hungary was forced to surrender about one-third of its territory to Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia. That meant large Hungarian populations found themselves living on foreign soil.

Bombs are falling in Vojvodina, the province that is home to most Hungarians. There are also reports that many young Hungarian men are being drafted into the Yugoslav army.

"They are not doing enough. I don't know what they should do. But they are not doing enough," said Csilla Domo, a 40-year-old social worker in Budapest.

But her despair doesn't compare to that of Csaba Ollai, an ethnic Hungarian from Vojvodina. The happiness he felt when his motherland joined NATO evaporated when the alliance started bombarding sites near his hometown.

"The Hungarian government is acting like zombies," said the 28-year-old mechanic. "Hungary is in NATO, but they don't really have the right to say anything. They are too new."

Rudolf Joo, deputy secretary of state in Hungary's Foreign Ministry, understands their frustration. He said the allies appreciate Hungary's unique position and it will not be required to send any ground troops if the mission moves to that level. Hungary has instead provided the

use of its airspace and military bases.

Joo said Hungary is doing as much as possible for their brethren in Yugoslavia. Diplomatic overtures have been made to Yugoslavia to end the drafting of young Hungarian men, but Joo said it is impossible to measuring the effectiveness of the requests. Joo added that it would be inappropriate for Hungary to ask NATO to spare Vojvodina from assaults because it would affect the mission. "This is a specific situation, a hard situation," said Joo. "We don't feel schizophrenic. There is no double loyalty. We stand with our allies."

---

**Houston Chronicle**

**Date:** April 11, 1999

**Page:** 29

Copyright 1999 Houston Chronicle