

NATO Neophytes in a Quandary



Hungary has mixed feelings about its role in the conflict with neighboring Yugoslavia, but troops from other NATO member nations are streaming into the Balkans to coordinate refugee relief. At left, members of the 1st Combat Communications team based in Ramstein, Germany, were greeted by Air Force comrades as they arrived at the Tirana military airport in Albania.

Photos by Associated Press

They want to be team players but question attacks

By Theresa Agovino
CHRONICLE FOREIGN SERVICE

BUDAPEST — 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 on Yugoslavia.

If that wasn't difficult enough, about 350,000 ethnic Hungarians

BRIEFING live in northern Europe Yugoslavia, a result of the first

World War. So Hungary now is ensconced in an alliance that is dropping bombs in places inhabited by its extended family.

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

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



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British Army engineer Garry Windle held an ethnic Albanian refugee child in a NATO refugee camp near Skopje, Macedonia.

hopefuls where the alliance was viewed as an almost mystical force field against Russia and a Western

Eastern Europeans didn't fully understand that the promise of security required obligations — duties that can be dangerous and controversial. Now those lessons are abundantly clear, especially in Hungary.

The delicacy of the situation was illustrated yesterday, when Hungary turned back armor-plated vehicles at its northern border that were part of a Russian convoy of humanitarian aid destined for Belgrade. Russian authorities charged Hungary with caving in to pressure from NATO headquarters in refusing entry to the vehicles, which they characterized as an escort guard that had crossed the border on humanitarian missions many times in the past.

For many Hungarians, enthusiastic support for NATO has been tempered by the reality of the current conflict.

Penzes, the teacher, voted 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

stamp of approval for embracing democracy.

Western diplomats worried that

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New NATO Members Have Mixed Feelings

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the bombing campaign, and not simply because of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia. The 31-year-old wonders whether NATO's mission is well-planned and if alliance officials really understand the Balkans.

"I just wanted the security," Penzes says of her vote. "I never thought we would be on the side of the attackers. Being in NATO is much deeper than we thought."

But it isn't just citizens of NATO's newest members — Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland — that have gotten a crash course in NATO reality. Those in countries excluded from the NATO expansion no longer view NATO with unreserved admiration, either. Polls taken before the NATO expansion showed that up to 95 percent of Romanians supported joining the alliance. A more recent poll showed that only 11 percent of Romanians believe their country should support NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia.

Romania is in a unique position because, like Bulgaria, it borders Yugoslavia and has offered its airspace to NATO. But Romania was a serious contender for NATO membership, while Bulgaria was not. Romania now finds itself siding with an alliance that didn't want it against a longtime ally.

"We are ignoring our loyal friends for a big power that rejects us. There are concerns that it isn't in our national interest," says 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 Romania.

"Does this mean if Hungarians (in Romania) want independence, they would bomb Romania?" demands Iacon, a 50-year-old bookseller who would not give his last name. "I don't want NATO anymore."

NATO intervention in Romania is highly unlikely. Romania is a democracy, the Hungarian minority is not abused, and Romania is on excellent terms with Western governments. Nonetheless, some fear that Romania's far-right parties could play on such fears and create an anti-NATO sentiment before the next round of NATO expansion.

The timetable for NATO expansion is unclear, so the government has time to dispel any developing apprehension about the alliance.

But it may be harder to explain NATO's changing role to a population with a one-dimensional view of the alliance.

"We thought about NATO as victory and safety," says Mihai Cojanu, a 22-year-old chemistry student. "We felt betrayed by the rejection and now this (this bombing). I think there were better ways to solve the conflict. 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 stripped of about one-third of its territory for its allegiance to the Central Powers. That resulted in large Hungarian populations in Yugoslavia and Romania.

Today, bombs are falling in Vojvodina, the Yugoslavian province that is home to most of the country's Hungarians. There are also reports that many young ethnic Hungarian men are being drafted into the Yugoslav army.

The Hungarian authorities "are not doing enough. I don't know what they should do, but they are not doing enough," says 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 starting bombarding sites near his hometown.

"The Hungarian government is acting like zombies," says 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 at Hungary's foreign ministry, understands their frustration. He says the allies appreciate Hungary's unique position and will not require it to send any ground troops if the mission moves to that level. Hungary has allowed alliance planes to use its airspace and military bases.

Hungary is doing as much as possible for its brethren in Yugoslavia, Joo says. Diplomatic overtures have been made to Yugoslavia to end the drafting of young Hungarian men. He adds that it would be inappropriate for Hungary to ask NATO to spare Vojvodina from assaults.

"This is a specific situation, a hard situation," Joo says. "But we don't feel any double loyalty. We stand with our allies."