

# THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUNGARIAN SECURITY POLICY THINKING BETWEEN 1989-1999, WITH A SPECIAL VIEW ON THE HUNGARIAN DEFENCE FORCES”

**Dr. József Lajos NÉMETH, PhD**

Adjunctive Professor, National University of Public Service, Budapest, HUNGARY

## Abstract

*Hungarian security policy thinking went through basic and crucial changes in the last two decades. As a result, we can see a kind of 'evolution,' which starts from a former Soviet satellite state status through to a period of looking for a role to a period of being an active member of the Trans- and Euro-Atlantic community. One of the most significant security and defence policy changes can be seen in the shaping and restructuring of the Hungarian Defence Forces.*

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**Key words:** Hungary, security policy, armed forces, regime change, Warsaw Pact, NATO

## Introduction

Nowadays Hungary has got professional defence forces, which have to fulfil three basic tasks based on the Basic Law (see: Constitution):  
to defend Hungarian territory in the case of any aggression;  
to fulfil the tasks deriving from the different collective security (United Nations-UN), collective defence (North Atlantic Alliance-NATO), complex (European

Union-EU), cooperative security (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe-OSCE) and other (for example Visegrad Four-V4) memberships; to participate in “other task”, which are basically disaster management operations<sup>1</sup>.

In other words, the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) have to fulfil peace missions and missions which are differing from these (non-peace).

In order to fulfil the international tasks Hungary has dedicated an ambitious number of 1000 military personnel, which is provided by a relatively small force (around 29.700 persons in 2012)<sup>2</sup>. Hungarian soldiers are serving on three continents as peacekeepers, military observers, advisors, trainers or in crisis response operations. Of course, the Hungarian national military representatives are working in administrative positions in NATO or in the EU, and they are fulfilling many military diplomacy tasks as well.

The Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) work under the political guidance and civil control of the Ministry of Defence, led by the Chief of the General Staff. HDF's tasks are fulfilled through the so called “Joint Operational Command” which contains combat, combat-support and service-support organizational elements.

Based on the “snap-shot” briefly described above we can raise the question of which steps led to the current situation. In other words, what were the changes, obstacles and influencing factors which formulated the Hungarian Defence Forces in the last two or more decades, but especially up until Hungary became NATO member in 1999?

<sup>1</sup> *Magyarország Alaptörvénye (Basic Law of Hungary)*, 25 April 2010, Article 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Dr. Habil Kiss Zoltán László: A Honvéd Vezérkar főnök előadása a Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem biztonság- és védelempolitika szakos hallgatóinak (Speech given for the students of the National University of Public Service by Hungarian Chief of General Staff)*, 25 May 2012, in: [http://www.honvedelem.hu/container/files/attachments/32119/vezerkarfonoki\\_eloadas\\_nke\\_2012\\_0525.pdf](http://www.honvedelem.hu/container/files/attachments/32119/vezerkarfonoki_eloadas_nke_2012_0525.pdf), downloaded: 12 May 2013, p. 02.

## Hungarian armed forces in the Warsaw pact era

Basically the same happened with many Central and Eastern European countries after WWII: they became heavily influenced by the Soviets, who quickly created the Warsaw Pact (1955), which gave the military framework and content for each member state regarding all security efforts. The so called “military policy” started to evolve on both sides, based on the fact that in this era a nuclear weapon centred military might and strong believe in the final devastating clash (Third World War) were shaping both political and economical thoughts and even basic daily life<sup>3</sup>.

In these times Hungary was suffering under Soviet suppression and as result a short and dramatic revolution happened in 1956, in which the Hungarian army played a crucial role through supporting the freedom fighters. It was a clear and dramatic message for them (Soviets): it was time to reshape, rethink and reorganize many things in Hungary, including the Hungarian People’s Army. It started quickly and Janos Kadar expressed in 1958 at a military conference that “the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party is trusts the People’s Army”<sup>4</sup>.

When the Warsaw Pact started to work it didn’t seem that there would be so many tensions among the partners. One of the possible reasons for these laid in the centralized and Moscow led politico-military directives, which – at least theoretically – had to be accepted and executed by each member states. But the problem with this “guidance” was that it was “too big or too large” for those who were supposed to fulfil the Soviet military expectations, especially those which planned huge military technology developments based on the five years planning system: a kind of full rearmament and modernization (!). Among them was Hungary, which used all kinds of opportunities to oppose or at least slow down the heavy pressure arriving from the Soviet – at the empire level thinking – generals<sup>5</sup>.

3 At this point it is important to add, that the “military policy” in the Soviet (Eastern) military sciences was similar to the term “security policy” used in the West. Later this term almost disappeared and nowadays the term “defence policy” is the closest to its original meaning.

4 *Kádár János: Béke, függetlenség, honvédelem*, Zrínyi Katonai Kiadó, Budapest, 1985, p. 83.

5 *Kárpáti Ferenc: Puskalövés nélkül*, Duna International, 2011, p. 51-112.

As time passed and the 1980s arrived many things changed in international relations: basically the détente experienced in the '70s had disappeared and many internal and external tensions started to boil on both sides. During these years the Hungarian People's Army reached the characteristics of a "mass army": it meant having a peace strength which was too high; using both old and new military technology at the same time; excessive expectations for costs, materials and soldiers; following the Soviet military doctrine; and seasonal works made in and for the national economy<sup>6</sup>.

This meant huge pressure for the already suffering Hungarian economy and as a result the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party decided to launch a military reform in order to build a more adequate military force to match the existing economical possibilities, the country's geographical location, the "real" role of Hungary in the Warsaw Pact and the quick and crucial changes happening in military technology<sup>7</sup>.

The changes – under the code name "RUBIN" – came into force on 1st March 1987 and as a result, the earlier division level structure decreased to brigade level. This step was against the existing Soviet military doctrine, who expressed their revulsion but they didn't refuse it. At this moment it is crucial to mention that this "peaceful" approach was more related to the policies called "glasnost" and "perestroika" launched earlier by Gorbachev than to the "kindness" of the Soviet generals. In the second part of the 80's we can see a series of such decisions, which were supposed to throw into relief some "national" characteristics of the Hungarian armed forces (for example: national tricolour in the Buda castle, changes in uniforms and daily official greetings, etc.).

This "openness" led also to the breakthrough in 1989, when the Warsaw Pact forces shared openly their force power: in the case of Hungary the armed forces amounted to 155,700 persons (including civilians) in peace time<sup>8</sup>. In January, 1989 – somehow as a result of what was happening in contemporary international relations – it was announced that the Hungarian People's Army will

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Szántó Mihály: *A Magyar Honvédség a rendszerváltástól a NATO tagságig*, egyetemi jegyzet, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem, Budapest, 2002, p. 06.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 08.

have a reduction through 1989-1990 of 9%<sup>9</sup>. The changes were envisioned to be executed in three steps: the first was made at the end of 1989, when the political-governmental and the command and control tasks were separated: the first field moved to the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence and the second became the responsibility of the Commander of the Hungarian People's Army.

The second step was overwritten by many unexpected international and social changes, and in November 1989 Prime Minister Miklós Németh expressed that as well as the 9% reduction planned earlier there will be more, a 20-25% cut in manpower and the armed forces need to change their characteristics for a nation-defending role<sup>10</sup>. However some experts were arguing that his step was more related to the expectations that the armed forces needed to be quarantined and make an impact for the upcoming democratic elections (1990) and it would serve much better the Communist Party's political campaign efforts<sup>11</sup>. If it is true, we can raise the question of where the trust expressed by Janos Kadar in 1956 in the Hungarian People's Army had gone by the end of the 80's.

The end of the 80's was a very intensive period for the Hungarian military: the question of the stationing of Soviet nuclear missiles in the Bakony mountains needed to be solved;  
Hungarian political leaders initiated the Soviet troops withdrawal, which ended at the end of June 1991;  
Hungarian armed forces gave assistance and support for the refugees escaping Ceausescu-led Romania;  
in a domestically and internationally crucial moment – in May-June 1989 – Hungary removed the so called “Iron Curtain”, and in September opened its border for many East-German citizens, which basically gave a huge boost for the upcoming changes, such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall (November, 1989).

Meanwhile deep changes happened in Hungarian society too: the so called “Roundtable Talks” started to evolve and created a semi-democratic sphere; on 23rd October 1989 Hungary became a “Republic” and on 1st March 1990, the

9 Ibid. p. 09.

10 Ibid. p. 11.

11 *Jeffrey Simon: NATO and Hungary: Problems in Civil-Military Relations*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers INC, Oxford, 2003, p. 02.

Hungarian People's Army got back its old name: the "Hungarian Defence Forces" (Magyar Honvédség)<sup>12</sup>.

As we look back to this year, we can have a sense of "euphoria", but we shouldn't forget that the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact still existed...

## A new political system, old equipment - new defence forces

The democratic transition in Hungary happened in a similar way to the Polish one, it was "a transition through extrication", which means that the leading regime was participating in the system change negotiations, but not in a decisive role as if it would be a "transition through transaction" (for example in the case of Romania)<sup>13</sup>.

In autumn, 1990 the first democratic elections happened in Hungary after the communist system collapsed. As a result, the six party member Parliament started to build the elements of the rule of law, market economy, etc., and soon the governing party – the Hungarian Democrat Forum (HDF-Magyar Demokrata Fórum) – expressed the opinion that the Ministry of Defence has got strategic importance<sup>14</sup>.

In parallel, huge efforts were put into the problem of how to abandon the Warsaw Pact, and some Hungarian experts were arguing that it needed to be eliminated by internal efforts, not by jumping out<sup>15</sup>. Finally, the WP was abolished on 01 April 1991, but this decision was made earlier on the Political Consultative Meeting in Budapest on 25 February, 1991<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Szántó Mihály: *A Magyar Honvédség a rendszerváltástól a NATO tagságig*, egyetemi jegyzet, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem, Budapest, 2002, p. 09.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Simon: *NATO and Hungary: Problems in Civil-Military Relations*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers INC, Oxford, 2003, p.01.

<sup>14</sup> Csendes László: *Hadsereg-történet*, in: Új Honvédségi Szemle, Különkiadás, 1998, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Németh József Lajos: *Irányított interjú Deák Péterrel az MTA Bolyai János Kutatói Ösztöndíjtámogatásával*, in: *Hadtudományi Szemle*, 2013, VI/1. szám, Nemzeti Közsolgálati Egyetem, Hadtudományi és Honvédtisztképző Kar, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Makk László mk. vezérőrnagy: *A haderő átalakítása a hidegháború utáni korszak biztonsági kihívásainak tükrében*, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem, PhD értekezés, 2008, p. 06.

At this moment, the Hungarian Defence Forces became a really national and independent entity, which – at the same time – had to face very serious external and internal challenges. Based on the latest findings and research results, it seems when the Warsaw Pact was abandoned, then not just a military alliance disappeared, but the support, maintenance and military industry created earlier also disappeared: as a result, many people lost their jobs and the national economy suffered heavy losses.

After these changes Hungary became suddenly alone and when the previous security umbrella disappeared a so called “security vacuum” was generated. In this situation the country had to face the fact, that the earlier allies had become independent too, and the former commonly shared interests turned out to be individual or even the reverse. In this situation not just the bilateral relations were needed to be restarted, but Hungary’s future foreign policy priorities were under huge debate and many times became a part of the daily political debates. Basically, in the years of 1989-1991 there were six possible scenarios:

neutrality;

full independence;

regional cooperation;

joining the European security system;

Euro-Atlantic integration<sup>17</sup>;

keeping up a more flexible alliance with the Soviet Union (but this idea was quickly dropped, recognizing the international and domestic reality)<sup>18</sup>.

As we can see, in all of the above mentioned cases the Hungarian Defence Forces had to play a crucial role, but it was still oversized, overloaded, not effectively working, with little support from society and struggling with serious financial problems.

In June 1991 Slovenia – after the declaration of its independence – was attacked by Yugoslavian forces and after this so called “10-day-war” the Balkan Wars started to take place in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Serbia up until 1995.

17 *A kilencvenes évekeleje*, in: [http://biztpol.corvinuembassy.com/?module=corvinak&module\\_id=4&cid=119](http://biztpol.corvinuembassy.com/?module=corvinak&module_id=4&cid=119), downloaded: 20 April 2013.

18 *Tíz éve a NATO-ban*, szerkesztette: Szenes Zoltán és Tálás Péter, Zrínyi Kiadó, 2009, p.12.

Because the former Yugoslavian states were direct neighbours of Hungary, the Hungarian Defence Forces had to face a serious challenge: not just to secure the homeland territory but at the same time avoid any escalation in these conflicts.

In these circumstances it became more and more clear that basically four parallel external tasks had to be fulfilled by the Hungarian Defence Forces:

to establish and maintain the elements of an independent homeland defence system;

to fulfil the security and defence requirements which stem from the Euro-Atlantic integration;

to participate in the process of conventional weapon reduction in Europe;

to give adequate answers for the regional security challenges (including the neighbouring states, NATO, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Balkan Wars, etc.)<sup>19</sup>.

Of course, these tasks could be fulfilled by a strong and legitimate legal background, which were laid down in the New Constitution (1989), in the Law on Homeland Defence (1993/CX) in the Basic Principles of Security Policy (March, 1993) and in the Basic Principles Homeland Defence (April, 1993). Additionally, the Government Program – which was accepted in September, 1990 – gave some important guidelines related to the upcoming defence restructuring tasks.

One of the most remarkable changes of the Hungarian Defence Forces was visible in manpower reduction, which is shown in the following table:

Year	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
Manpower	155700	143200	121000	104000	100000
Reduction related to 1989	-	8%	22%	33%	36%

Source: Dr. Szántó Mihály: *A Magyar Honvédség a rendszerváltástól a NATO tagságig*, egyetemi jegyzet, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem, Budapest, 2002, p. 26.

**Table 1. Manpower reduction in the Hungarian Defence Forces between 1989 and 1993**

<sup>19</sup> Makk László mk. vezérőrnagy: *A haderő átalakítása a hidegháború utáni korszak biztonsági kihívásainak tükrében*, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem, PhD értekezés, 2008, p. 08.



As we can see the level of manpower reduction by 1993 was 36% as related to the size of the Hungarian Armed Forces in 1989. The most dramatic change happened in the case of the conscript soldiers: their number dropped by 43% (from 91900 in 1989 to 52340 by 1993)<sup>20</sup>.

The military spending between 1989-1994 was as follows:

Year	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
GDP%	3,8	3,1	2,4	2,3	2,1

Source: World Bank, in: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?page=4>, accessed 27 April 2013.

**Table 2. Military spending in Hungary in GDP% between 1989 and 1993**

As we can see the budget for defence was decreasing continually, but most dramatically from 1990-1991.

In the first governmental period (1990-1994) the internal changes in the HDF affected the following fields:

- organization, structure and dislocation;
- the direction of training: from attack to active defence;
- de-politicizing and strengthening the national characteristics;
- introducing new military components (such as airborne battalion, electronic battle capable regiment);
- struggling with the decreasing quality of the existing military technology;
- growing moral problems of the continuous restructuring efforts;
- creating the elements of human resources;
- growing activity in military diplomacy;
- reshaping the military educational system;
- fulfil the tasks stemming from the international crisis response and peace-keeping operations (such as in the Gulf War-1991; Balkan Missions; etc.)
- struggling for adequate social support;

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Szántó Mihály: *A Magyar Honvédség a rendszerváltástól a NATO tagságig*, egyetemi jegyzet, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem, Budapest, 2002, p. 26.

creating new elements in order to fulfil the constitutional requirement related to the freedom of conscience;  
building the advocate system for the military personnel  
creating and adjusting to civil control.

## Developments in 1994-1998

After the spring elections in 1994 the Hungarian Socialist Party gained a majority in the Hungarian Parliament. The old-new socialist leadership (the government was led by Prime Minister Gyula Horn) basically followed the previously started integration procedure into the Euro-Atlantic security system. Its main and central goal was to join to the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The first step had already been made in 1991, when the North-Atlantic Cooperation Council was created “as a forum for dialogue and cooperation with NATO’s former Warsaw Pact adversaries”<sup>21</sup>.

In February 1994 Hungary – among many other countries – joined to the framework contract of the Partnership for Peace Programme issued by the Heads of State and Governments participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 10-11 January 1994<sup>22</sup>. This step from one side made it possible for the HDF to take a look inside NATO at how the Alliance works and what are the basic requirements, from the other side it helped to strengthen regional security. This last effect was extremely important especially taken into consideration the fact that in the surrounding countries many changes had happened in the last few years, for example Hungary’s neighbouring countries raised from five to seven.

In spring 1995 Hungary started to participate in the Planning and Review Process (PARP), which goal “is to provide a structured basis for identifying partner forces

21 *The North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) (archived)*, in: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_69344.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_69344.htm), downloaded: 25 April 2013.

22 Partnership for Peace: Framework Document, Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council/North Atlantic Cooperation Council, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 10-11 January 1994, in: <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c940110b.htm>, downloaded: 25 April 2013.

and capabilities that could be available to the Alliance for multinational training, exercises and operations”<sup>23</sup>.

On 29 January, 1996 Hungary expressed its will to join NATO and after more than one year and a series of different professional talks NATO expressed also its will to invite the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary to be its members. In order to strengthen the national will there was a referendum held on 16th November, 1997; 49% of eligible voters participated and 85,33% of them supported NATO membership<sup>24</sup>.

Finally, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1999, Hungary signed the joining contract among with the earlier mentioned two states.

At this point it is important to mention, that parallel to the above mentioned procedures many integration steps were being taken towards the European Union (EU) too, and Hungary became an EU member in 2004. (It is important to add the processes taken for/by the western members of the European Union too.)

In these years, the HDF had to learn, understand and apply the terms of “interoperability” and “compatibility”, in order to prove its ability and creditability as a NATO member candidate. At the same time NATO had to recognize the Hungarian force structure, military thinking and many other things.

In 1994 a study was launched by NATO in order to give and get the necessary information about the enlargement procedures for all participants<sup>25</sup>. This study contained many important answers and requirements, however the financial cost of joining was hidden (or at least handled at minimum level) by the politicians until 1997, when the defence spending started to grow again for the first time after the collapse of the communist system<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> *Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process*, in: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_68277.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_68277.htm), downloaded: 27 April 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Szántó Mihály: *A Magyar Honvédség a rendszerváltástól a NATO tagságig*, egyetemi jegyzet, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem, Budapest, 2002, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> *Study on NATO Enlargement*, 03 September 1995, in: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_24733.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_24733.htm), downloaded: 25 April 2013.

<sup>26</sup> *Tíz éve a NATO-ban*, szerkesztette: Szenes Zoltán és Tóth Péter, Zrínyi Kiadó, 2009, p. 22.

The tasks mentioned for the first governmental period on the one hand became more sophisticated (such as the legal background, military diplomacy, restructuring the command and control elements, etc.) and on the other hand new elements evolved such as the active participation in the peaceful solution of the Balkan crisis. This included many different efforts:

sending troops for the Implementation Force (IFOR) and afterwards for the Stabilization Force (SFOR) in 1995-1998;

to provide host nation support (for example at the Taszar airbase);

to provide engineer support (for example in Okucani).

Parallel to the above mentioned changes the manpower reduction of HDF continued:

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Manpower	99 248	81 266	66 872	60 000	61 500

Source: A honvédelem négy éve: 1994-1998, Zrínyi Kiadó, 1998, p.79.

**Table 3. Manpower reduction in the Hungarian Defence Forces between 1994 and 1998**

The military spending showed the same reduction as in the earlier governmental period, but in 1997 and 1999 we can see some growth, which is related to the upcoming NATO accession.

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
GDP%	2,0	1,6	1,5	1,7	1,5	1,7

Source: World Bank, in: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?page=3>, downloaded: 27 April 2013/

**Table 4. Military spending in Hungary in GDP% between 1994 and 1999**

An interesting and very remarkable result happened in HDF's training and education system, when the Zrínyi Miklos National Defence University (ZMNDU) was established in 1996, following the US example in Washington DC of the National Defence University. In its unique educational system civilian and

military students were trained at the same time and in 1997 the so called “experts of security and defence policy” branch was launched full time with a five-year-long study period<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusions

It is still debated today whether the Hungarian Defence Forces were restructured, reshaped or re-edified. It is a fact, however, that many changes occurred in the period of 1989-1999 and as a result the basics of the currently operating military system were laid down.

In this period the international security framework was dramatically changed and this in turn affected deeply Hungarian security-policy thinking. As one of the results, the HDF changed its earlier operating Eastern-Western directions to a nation-characterized and NATO compatible force.

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<sup>27</sup> This branch is still existing in the framework of the National University of Public Service.

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