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Impact of NATO on Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic: the Case of Unfulfilled Commitments and Broken Promises

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This paper will argue that Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were admitted to the alliance too early. In turn, this premature entry encouraged these states to be ‘free-riders’ and consumers not producers of the security provided by NATO. Although NATO enlargement was political in nature and neither NATO nor its individual members had the illusion that three economies-in-transition are able to meet the technical standards of the organization, which consists of the most developed countries, the alliance, nevertheless, presented the prospective candidates with a set of political and military criteria and received, in return, explicit pledges. Despite this fact, the new member states, more often than not, failed to live up to their political and military obligations that came with their membership in NATO. They had great difficulties in behaving appropriately according to unwritten rules of political allegiance and loyalty to the alliance they have recently joined. Additionally, they fell short of acting on their promises to implement concrete reforms in the military-related fields. In order to understand why the three states generally failed to live up to their promises and commitments, this study will argue that NATO gave up voluntarily the only instrument it had that forced the three Central European states to behave appropriately and act on their promises. This instrument was a luring membership in the alliance. As a result of the above analysis, this paper will conclude with a specific policy recommendation: NATO should considerably slow down the process of any future enlargements and use more effectively and fully a pre-accession mechanism such as the Membership Action Plan before granting any new membership.

Firstly, this paper will expose the extent to which the new member states turned out to be ‘rotten’ apples in the alliance basket. This study will look at the way the new member states acted during Kosovo operation and the current war against terrorism in order to gauge the appropriateness of their behavior as the new members of the alliance that is based on specific norms and values. It will be shown that the new member states had major difficulties in fulfilling very basic commitments such as a straightforward political support for NATO actions, not to mention offers of more tangible assets in the form of concrete military support. These countries proved to be weakly socialized with the existing NATO procedures and norms and demonstrated a self-centered and egoist behavior that corresponded with their perception about the alliance as the entity that provides them with benefits and imposes no costs.

Subsequently, this paper will show how poorly, from a practical point of view, the new member states met NATO requirements and complied with their commitments in the sphere of military reforms since the time of their admission. This analysis will concentrate on an unusually stiff criticism that came from the NATO headquarters that is typically reserved in its judgments and tends to be diplomatically prudent so as not to be accused of interference in the internal affairs of its member states. However, a continuing lackluster progress in implementing commitments made by Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary before they joined NATO, forced the high representatives of the alliance, usually diplomatically silent and politically restrained, to voice their unhappiness and criticism about the pace of military reforms. This was done in exceptionally harsh and public manners. Finally, this study will focus on the source of the existing NATO weakness in pressing the new member states to carry out promised reforms and follow already made commitments. This analysis will point out that the alliance should give more time for any future aspiring countries to socialize with NATO norms while declaring that the candidate states will be formally admitted to the organization only if they fulfill all the specified requirements that have both political and practical natures.

Failed tests of political will to take on collective responsibilities

Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary joined the alliance in 1999 and their political loyalty was very quickly tested during NATO operations in Kosovo. Although it was more a political rather than a military test, still two out of three states had difficulties to pass it. During the conflict, the Central European countries were merely asked to express their political support rather than to contribute with more tangible assets. Still Hungary and particularly the Czech Republic had problems to live up to their political commitments. Hungary did provide its airspace and landing strips for NATO airplanes. However, as the Foreign Minister, Janos Martonyi admitted, his country would authorize the use of airspace and airports even if it had not been NATO member (Kosztolanyi, Central European Review, 2003). Thus, one cannot overestimate the significance of Hungary's contribution to NATO campaign. On the contrary, Hungary became increasingly uneasy about NATO operation. Being concerned about its ethnic minority in the Vojvodina, which could become a hostage to political abuses from the Serb authorities while the conflict dragged on, Hungary began voicing growing misgivings about NATO performance. Its loyalty as the new NATO ally was clearly put in doubt when the Hungarian government expressed bluntly via its foreign minister that "a deployment of ground forces departing from Hungary would be entirely unacceptable" (Kosztolanyi, Central European Review, 2003). This occurred even before NATO asked for such sacrifice and exactly in the time, when Hungary was expected to be steadfast about its support for NATO. Such statement raised serious worries about Hungary's commitment to the alliance, particularly during the most difficult times when such allegiance was needed the most. Further damage to the Hungarian credibility was inflicted by the charge made on the pages of the Washington Post. The American newspaper, while referring to the comments made by the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, suggested that Hungary broke the embargo on trading in oil with Yugoslavia. The Hungarian politicians deny the accusations but some government officials were more defensive, making the charge to be seen as if it were true. The high-ranking official from the Hungarian Ministry of Economic Affairs "pointed out that neither the UN nor the EU had adopted any resolution that would prevent Hungary from trading even in oil with Yugoslavia" (Kosztolanyi, Central European Review). During NATO first serious

military operation outside its area, Hungary proved to be less than a reliable ally. The difficult situation tested Hungary trustworthiness and showed plainly the prevalence of its self-oriented policies over the interests of the whole alliance. The Czech Republic often went even further than its Hungarian counterpart in its critical attitude towards NATO operation in Kosovo. It distanced itself from NATO action in Yugoslavia by publicly questioning its moral underpinnings. Prime Minister Milos Zeman referred to NATO as "warmongers" and "primitive troglodytes" during the operation in Kosovo (Hendrickson, 2000-2001). Because of the Czech government's criticism of NATO actions, some diplomats complained that "the Czechs were placing Slavic brotherhood ahead of alliance loyalties" (Drozdiak 1999). At the same time, the NATO Secretary General Javier Solana was forced to give a diplomatic reprimand to the Czech Republic's Ambassador to NATO, Karol Kavanda "for Prague's alleged failure to live up to its new responsibilities" (Drozdiak 1999).

The behavior of Hungary and the Czech Republic during Kosovo conflict showed how ineffectively these countries internalized norms and principles, which NATO stood for and how poorly they were socialized to perform the roles of valuable members of the alliance. The political actions of these countries often went against the established ways of doing things in NATO. This, in turn, undermined the very idea of consensual decision-making in NATO and its joint actions, which were particularly in great need during the crisis such as Kosovo.

The 1999 military operation, however, was not the last test that the new comers generally failed to pass. The lesson coming from the war against terrorism, which NATO lunched soon after the terrorist attacks in the United States, is even less comforting. The response of the Central European states to the terrorism challenges raises additional questions about these countries commitment to the alliance. Their actions showed that the new NATO member states are far from understanding their political and military obligations, which stem both, from their membership in NATO and from invoking the article V of NATO Charter that calls for a collective defense of the attacked alliance member^[1]. For example, in 2002, Hungary was singled out as the only alliance member (apart from Iceland but Iceland does not have an army) that "failed to make a single contribution to the war on terrorism" (Kliphuis, Radio Netherlands, 2002). It occurred despite the fact that Hungary raised no objections when it voted with other members to invoke article V to support the United States. But this voting was seen more in political than in any practical categories and this view was entirely consistent with Hungary's perception about its membership in the alliance that has been seen less as an obligation-creating institution and more as an entitlement-granting 'enterprise'. Again, it proved how easy is to make highly publicized gestures that were subsequently followed by inaction and hesitation. Hungary did eventually act and sent one of its units to Afghanistan but it occurred more than two years after September of 11 and only after NATO harsh reprimands and criticism, which if not addressed, could eventually, discredit Hungary on the international stage. However, as one of the senior defense diplomats from the embassy of a Western NATO state underlined, the other NATO members felt Hungary "could have done more in Afghanistan". (Allan, 2002). As in the case of Hungary, the Czech Republic's contribution to the war against terrorism, which should have happened automatically after NATO countries invoked article V, was less than voluntarily and took place only after NATO and other allies' demands became public and thus, difficult to ignore. It took more than a year for the Czechs to contribute their military personnel to the fight against international terrorism.

Looking at the immediate political consequences of the 1999 enlargement, it became clear that NATO admitted the Central European states prematurely. Politically, these states proved how difficult is to socialize new members that see their security from particularistic point of views, which leads them to care first of all about their own well-being rather than a well-being of the alliance as a whole. As one of the participants of the seminar noticed “NATO is a like a factory producing security” (Odessa, 27.09.2003). Unfortunately, some shareholders seem to care more about their own shares than about the factory as a whole. They are failing to see that the value of their shares is indispensably connected with the effective teamwork at the factory production line.

Unfulfilled military commitments of the new allies

The new member states seem not only ill prepared to take political obligations seriously but what is even more important they break specific promises about the reforms that they were supposed to introduce after their were admitted to NATO. The extent to which the three new member states failed to live up to their commitments can be measured by the level of criticism and frequency by which Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were censured for not being able and willing to carry out military reforms. And the critical remarks and commentaries were unusually strong and recurrent when NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson and other NATO officials kept expressing their frustration about the performance of the new allies and continued reminding them about their failed commitments.

After Poland's first year in the alliance, in March 2000, NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson remarked that it was a disgrace that Poland could not mobilize for peacekeeping missions more than 2% of its soldiers. “Either one has a bad army or a bad concept of making use of it” said Robertson (Romanowska, *Wprost*, 2001). Few months later the Polish defense minister Janusz Onyszkiewicz received a letter from NATO headquarters in which Poland was named as the country that ‘earned’ the last place in terms of spending per soldier, far behind the Czech Republic and Hungary. NATO had also difficulties to understand why expenditures on military personnel were still decreasing while, at the same time, the number of the military personnel was being radically reduced. NATO also criticized the fact that instead of raising spending on military training and hardware money was directed on less urgent and even irrelevant to military performance things. In February 2001, for the third time since Poland joined NATO, the high-ranking official from the alliance criticized Poland for failing to live up to its commitments. The alliance's Supreme Commander in Europe, US General Joseph Ralston, (SACEUR), while talking to the Polish government representatives stated straightforwardly: “not only that you cannot spend money on military but on the army, you are spending shamefully little” (Romanowska, *Wprost*, 2001). General Ralston expressed the alliance's strong disapproval about inability of the Polish politicians to plan military expenses and reprimanded the government for not keeping the promise given to NATO that the country will spend 2.1% of its GDP on military. Instead the government decreased this figure to 1.92% in 2001. It was a clear violation of promises that Poland made before it joined the alliance. One of the Polish diplomat commented that that the situation had to be really bad if the general breaches one of the fundamental principle of the military establishment that of keeping publicly silence to express the alliance displeasure about Poland's performance (Urbanowicz, *Wprost*, 2001). One of the Polish scholars, who deals with Polish-NATO relations, doctor Grzegorz Kostrzewa-Zorbas from the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of

Science noted that Poland's relations with the alliance after the country's admission in 1999, are based on the politics of minimum. Poland does "only as much (meaning as little- MB) as not to cause an international scandal" (Kostrzewa-Zrobas quoted by Urbanowicz *Wprost*, 2001). An anonymous informant from NATO headquarters said that Poles, finally, should start implementing projects and programs that they promised. "You have to understand that membership places responsibilities and do not think that someone will do something instead of you. NATO is also you and not someone else" the informant from NATO headquarters was quoted as saying (see Urbanowicz, *Wprost*, 2001). In December 2001, the anonymous NATO source informed the Polish Press Agency that Poland was one of the countries to be named and openly criticized for a slow progress in reforming its army, particularly in the light of the war against terrorism. "The secretary-general is not pleased... (because)... many European members, including Poland, have failed to achieve adequate progress in rapid deployment, general military mobility, strategic transportation, intelligence and reconnaissance", the anonymous NATO source was quoted following the meeting of NATO defense ministers (BBC, December 2001). During the same gathering, the Polish Defense Minister Jerzy Szmajdziński admitted that because the government spent over 1bn zlotys (251m dollars) less on military upgrades in 2001, the fulfillment of several long-term NATO objectives that entitle high expenses would be jeopardized (BBC, December 2001). Describing the state of Poland's maturity to meet NATO standards, Paweł Now, Colonel of the Polish Army and Chief of the technical department of the Polish general staff, pessimistically conceded that the modernization of the Polish army would take "another few decades" (quoted by Borinski, 2002: 128). At the same time, the national weekly magazine *Wprost* reported that in 2002, according to NATO experts, more than 90% Polish army units did not fulfill NATO standards. Poland did not modernize its airports and navy bases to match NATO standards as it promised and the Polish aircrafts were still lacking the identification system 'friend-enemy' (Pleśniak and Rembelski, *Wprost*, 2002). In this circumstances it is not surprising that Poland quickly became a "sick-man" of the alliance.

Hungarians experienced as serious problems in implementing the army reforms as Poland did. In 2001, Hungary spent only 1.6% of its GDP for military in comparison with 2.2% of the Czech Republic and 1.92% of Poland (Urbanowicz, *Wprost*, 2001). It was a significant cut back on Hungary's 1997 pledge to NATO to spend 1.81% of its GDP on defense (See: NATO Powers Join Hands, May 31, 2001). The Hungarian governments were so negligent in implementing the reforms, which they made commitment to before joining the alliance that it raised unusually strong criticism from NATO. "The new Hungarian defense minister, Ferenc Juhasz (...) admitted on local radio after meeting with NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson that Hungary failed to meet its NATO commitments over the past four years to such an extent that the alliance has unofficially told him that Hungary would already have been expelled if an expulsion were possible" (Wallander, 2002: 5). At the same time, a senior diplomat from one of the embassy of a Western NATO member confirmed: "It is true that Hungary has been seen as an underperformer within NATO, and there has definitely been a general sense of disappointment" (Allan, 2002). Few weeks before the Prague summit in November 2002, NATO Secretary General George Robertson and General Joseph Ralston, the alliance's Supreme Commander in Europe, told the center-left Hungarian government that "its performance as new boy on the block left a lot to be desired" (Kliphuis, Radio Netherlands, 2002). During Ralston's meeting with Hungary's new Defense Minister Ferenc Juhász, the latter "was totally taken by surprise when he was given an old-fashioned talking-to as if he

were a school boy. Over the three years of its membership, Mr Juhász was told, Hungary had not met any of the commitments it had freely undertaken earlier” (Kliphuis, Radio Netherlands, 2002).

The Czech Republic, similarly to Poland and Hungary, does not give a better example of a trustworthy member of the alliance. Specifically, the Czech Republic was criticized for “dragging its heels over transformation of its armed forces and insufficient transparency of defence contracts” (Horakova, 2002). In December 2002, the Czech Republic announced the results of the tender to buy more than twenty new aircrafts, which raised criticism of corruption and poor transparency. More significantly, the tender and its usefulness were questioned by NATO Secretary General George Robertson, who suggested that new fighters were unnecessary from the NATO point of view and their financial costs would force the Czech government to abandon other, more urgent defense reforms. Addressing NATO criticism that the military changes in the Czech Republic are implemented too slowly and have narrow objectives, the Czech Defence minister Jaroslav Tvrdik said that if it had not been for the already initiated reforms (that were pressed by NATO before the Czech Republic joined the alliance- MB) the situation would have been much worse. (*Rzeczpospolita*, No 9, 11.01.2002). This comment reflects a very surprising picture about a strange sense of satisfaction of the Czech political elite with their country’s progress in meeting NATO requirements. It reveals a minimalist approach as far as the Czech international commitments are concerned. Instead of looking at the situation through specific deadlines by the end of which the Czech Republic promised to implement concrete reforms, the Czech government expresses its ill-conceived satisfaction that although the reforms were not finished it was better than nothing. Such an explanation is a narrowed-minded based on self interest and not the interest of the alliance as a whole since it is obvious that either unfulfilled commitments or only half-realized promises, they both, eventually weaken NATO.

Why did it go wrong?

The three new member states became consumers of not the contributors to the Euroatlantic security. Their promises made before these countries joined the alliance turned out to be blank checks given to please NATO members and gain their necessary support. The new states were not able and willing to meet political, legal and military obligations and commitments that stemmed from NATO membership. For the candidate states it was obvious that their promises could be never realized because as Gyoergy Keleti, the former Hungarian defense minister openly admitted: “if a country is not a NATO member yet it can – to put it bluntly— say many things about which it is hardly called into account” (Wallander, 2002: 5). What made the matters even worse was the fact that once the states entered the alliance they could keep ignoring their commitments and NATO demands for sharing greater burden of responsibilities since in practice the alliance “does not have procedures for dealing with members that violate its rules and standards” (Wallander 2002:3). In this way, NATO is toothless and not able to press the three states to keep their promises given before they joined the north Atlantic club. And what is worse, NATO is unable to push the states to implement further reforms that are required because of the changing NATO mission connected with the current war against terrorism. At the end, it turned out that the real motivation that forced the Central European states to continue reforming their military forces and fulfill promises made to NATO was the lure of membership and once the states joined the alliance this strong incentive disappeared.

The Hungarian Ambassador to NATO in 1995-2000 András Simonyi was explicit in his statement: “After getting into the club through considerable effort, we stopped caring” (interview in Budapest Sun) [2]. The argument that the new members would be interested in establishing their ‘bona fides’ (credentials) and not reckoning the boat (Smith, 2000:125) turned out to be an idealistic assumption.

No doubt that the greatest impact of NATO on the states is exercised in the very phase of these states’ accession to the alliance. The carrot is visible in the distance but it can still be taken away if the aspirant is not willing or able to fulfill the NATO requirements vigorously enough. Slovakia under Vladimir Meciar is a telling example. From the perspective of the aspiring states, the costs of behaving in accordance with NATO expectations are outweighed by the awaiting benefit in the form of membership. However, once the membership is realized a considerably motivating factor is no longer present and the main incentive to comply with NATO demands will, if not disappear, then become considerably weakened. Hence, a belief that NATO has a greater leverage over the states when they are in the accession period, not later when they already enter the military club. According to this logic, the alliance decreased significantly its influence over the conduct of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary when it voluntarily gave up its negotiation advantage connected with an offer of a potential membership after the admission of new members became a reality in 1999.

Procrastination: the best tool in the process of NATO enlargement

Admission of the states that have to yet introduce painful and costly reforms to satisfy NATO standards weakens the organization’s influence over these states and over the process of their military and political transformations. As a result, the new comers are not willing to continue the military reforms as quickly as NATO would like them to do and many times they feel free to abandon them without a fear of being sanctioned. If the potential entrants are admitted prematurely before they fulfill all the necessary conditions, once in NATO, they will be less keen to finish their reforms and even more so, less willing and able to take further responsibilities placed on them by the alliance. Ultimately, these countries will become security consumers rather than security producers thus, undermining the alliance. Additionally, a quicker pace of enlargement undermines the impact of socialization processes that the aspiring states undergo while learning new norms, rules and decision-making procedures characteristic for the alliance that works based on continuous consultations and consensus-building. Even if the conditions to join NATO are largely political in nature they should not be seen as cheap or fast to implement. As the lessons of Kosovo and the war against terrorism show a weak political commitment of the new member states led these countries to focus on their own particularistic and narrow-minded interests that eventually undermine credibility and effectiveness of the whole alliance. Thus, the longer it takes for the candidate states to join the elite’s club the more time they have to become familiar with its norms and rules and the greater the likelihood of their socialization through internalization of an appropriate behavior even before these states enter the alliance. The longer and slower pace of the accession negotiations should stem from the fact that NATO is the most effective, when states seeking to join it, are still outside the alliance (Sean, 1998: 113). And although there is never a guarantee that once the young democracies are inside, they would adhere to institutional norms and rules of the alliance the probability of such behavior is much higher when the states work longer within the alliance’s structures before they are rewarded a full membership. Thus, the lesson

for the alliance is to considerably slow down the pace of the enlargement process to give the aspiring states time to learn the rules, norms, principles and the ways of doing things in NATO. At the same time, a degree of future states' compliance with and commitment to NATO standards and missions should be measured by the extent to which the countries fulfilled NATO requirements before they joined the military club. As a result, the longer and harder it takes to get in the better for the alliance. Thus, the process of enlargement should continue until the candidate states fulfill all the necessary conditions (Barany, Spring 2002:156).

Conclusion in the form of practical recommendations

One of the high-ranking NATO officials noted that "Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary discovered NATO only when they joined it" (Odessa, 27.09.2003). The consequences of it led to a negative impact on the performance of the alliance. NATO, which took a hard lesson from it, seemed to learn from its previous mistakes and in April 1999 introduced the Membership Action Plan (MAP) MAP is designed to assist the current seven candidate countries in their preparations for NATO membership. However, in order to use its full potentials NATO should apply it much more rigorously and even establish a sort of benchmark- an objectively measured scope of implemented commitments- set on the level of, let's say, 90% of total required political and military reforms to be accomplished before the states can join the alliance.

NATO that is both a political club as well as a specific security oriented initiative should pay equal attention to political as well as practical standards. Today, political criteria in the enlargement decisions gain priority over concrete security and military considerations. This can eventually weaken the alliance and its security-guarantee functions. The process of enlargement as well as a post-enlargement adaptation period that every new member state goes through once it joins the alliance should be heavily shaped and guided by the stricter annual target plans and the verification mechanisms that should be established to monitor and evaluate the states' performance in implementing pledged civil and military reforms.

Socializing institutions such as the North Atlantic Council, the Partnership for Peace or the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council should be used much more extensively before any states are granted a full membership. Thus, NATO will give more time for the aspirant states to internalize (thus, to socialize with) the norms and procedures, which the alliance has applied in its work for more than fifty years of its existence.

Finally, the data of any future enlargements that has been, unfortunately, already set for the upcoming expansion of the alliance, should be only specified once most of the requirements are implemented, so as to keep the aspirants on their toes. From a negotiation perspective, it is a blunder to commit oneself to a certain enlargement date, which, in practice, is politically too costly to be altered and at the same time, to maintain a necessary leverage over the acceding states' commitments and pledges.

Any future enlargement of NATO should continue to be based less on words or empty political rhetoric and more on facts and activities that are measurable and results-oriented.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Article V of NATO Charter that was invoked by the alliance in an unanimous support for the United States after the attacks in New York and Washington DC, states: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all....".

[2] Interview with the former Hungarian Ambassador to NATO András Simonyi in Budapest Sun. See: http://www.budapestsun.com/full_story.asp?ArticleId={C2BA351FF9D44FD4928D29ED2E91B1A0}&From=News. Accessed on 1 September 2003.

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