

*Halki International Seminars*

**Central Europe and the Yugoslav Wars**

Monika Wohlfeld  
OP97.13

# CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE YUGOSLAV WARS<sup>1</sup>

by Dr. Monika Wohlfeld<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

When the *Pax Sovietica* disintegrated and the Warsaw Organisation collapsed in 1991, the countries of Central Europe (defined here to include the four Visegrad countries Poland, Czech and Slovak Republics and Hungary) entered a security limbo. In this situation, the Yugoslav crisis was for Central Europe both an issue of direct strategic concern (particularly for the neighboring country Hungary) and a test case of Western resolve and/or ability to deal with actual or potential problems in Europe. The Central European debate of the Western involvement in Yugoslavia has been part of a larger scale discussion about the future of the region's security in the post-Cold War era and the Central European countries' place within European and Euroatlantic organizations. Central European reactions to, and policies on, the events in former Yugoslavia have however not received the attention of analysts and observers which they deserve.

This paper first describes Central European Balkan policies as reactions to Western initiatives in former Yugoslavia. Second, it delineates the consequences of foreign policy lessons learned by Central Europe in the course of the Balkans crisis.

## 2. Central European policies toward former Yugoslavia

In the Yugoslav crisis, Central European countries themselves have rarely taken on a proactive approach. Their policies have generally been reflections of measures introduced by international organizations. Central Europeans argued that initially Western governments were preoccupied with other items on their crowded policy agenda and failed to recognize the implications of the Yugoslav crisis. Once Western mediation began, Central Europeans criticized efforts as hampered by the EU's lack of firm backing and unity on basis principles, which they interpreted as a return to old rivalries in Western Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Monika Wohlfeld is Research Fellow at the Western European Union-Institute for Security Studies. Paper presented at the Halki International Seminars ( 32 August-7 September 1996).

This, however, does not imply that Central European countries have in any way been in accord with each other on this issue either. Although all Central European governments followed the decisions of international law, the conflict divided them along a spectrum spanning between the position that the issue was a domestic one, to which solutions could only be found by the means of mediation and diplomacy, and an "interventionist" approach. Where they found themselves on this spectrum at any given time depended at least to some degree on both the physical distance from the conflict and the nature of their security problems.

Particularly at the early stages of the Balkan conflict, the lack of American involvement has been used by Central Europeans as an explanation for the slow response of Western European mechanism. Consequently, the progressively increasing U.S. presence has been greeted by them with relief. The UN decision to deploy peace-keeping forces in Croatia, and later in Bosnia was applauded by the Central European governments. Poland and the Czech and Slovak Republics send units to the UNPROFOR. When the UNPROFOR mandate expired, the NATO Secretary General has issued written invitations to 16 non-Nato countries to contribute forces to the NATO-led IFOR (the IFOR operation was replaced by SFOR at the end of 1996). All four Visegrad countries contribute to IFOR, as does Romania and Bulgaria, the Baltic states, Ukraine and Russia.

Hungary did not contribute to UNPROFOR as it chose not to be involved in the Yugoslav conflict. It has however decided on contributing a technical unit to IFOR. The Yugoslav government responded by emphasizing that it was 'wise' that the Hungarian contingent would not have a military role and would only carry self-defence<sup>2</sup> arms.

For the first time, Central European countries participate in the integrated NATO structure. Non-NATO IFOR contributors were incorporated through a coordination centre at SHAPE and liaison arrangements at various levels of the operation. At NATO headquarters they received daily written reports and briefings. Regular political consultations took place<sup>3</sup>.

Central Europe governments treated their participation as a step towards NATO membership, and were thus willing to accept the resulting costs<sup>4</sup>. In fact, only four days after signing an agreement with NATO finalizing the conditions for the Hungarian contingent's participation in IFOR, on 29 January 1996, the Hungarian Foreign Minister submitted a letter to the NATO Secretary General stating Hungary's readiness to have bilateral consultations with NATO on admission requirements<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the personal contribution to IFOR, Hungary hosted an IFOR logistics base, and an IFOR supply base (now SFOR). This was the first time that American units were based in a former WTO country. IFOR forces have also been granted permission to use Hungary's air space and rail transit<sup>6</sup>.

The decision of the Hungarian government to allow these bases on Hungarian ground was not without political consequences. A political storm was caused in Hungary by the statement of a US deputy defence secretary, John White, who argued that the NATO logistics base could continue to operate after the expiry of the IFOR mandate. The Defence Committee of the Hungarian National Assembly responded by arguing that

it was not possible for US military forces to stay in Hungary after the expiry of the IFOR mandate. This would only be possible with the consent of parliament.....it was conceivable that in place of the US logistics base an OSCE or UN peacekeeping base would be established in the future. That, however, would also have to be approved by the parliament. The IFOR mandate for the units stationed here will expire only once the situation in the former Yugoslavia becomes normal, consequently the authorization given by parliament has no deadline either. The National Assembly, however, may withdraw its consent at any time and the IFOR forces have to accept this<sup>7</sup>.

Russia, as well, criticized the statement and the Hungarian response to it. Russian Ambassador to Hungary, Ivan Aboymov said that 'he was uncomfortable'. The denial by Washington and by Budapest did not reassure Moscow, he emphasized<sup>8</sup>.

Most contributors from the Central European region find it difficult to recover the financial costs of a prolonged in peacekeeping operations in former Yugoslavia, although Hungary of course benefits from the presence of foreign troops on its territory both economically and politically. Unlike in the case of UNPROFOR, IFOR costs are carried by contributing countries. To give the magnitude of the financial weight, it suffices to say that in 1996 Romania spent some 12 bn lei for the Partnership for Peace programme, but 22,2 bn lei for the Romanian participation in IFOR<sup>9</sup>.

Also, a number of Central European countries have no legal provisions for participation of soldiers in peace-keeping units-they have to rely on volunteers. In addition, there has been domestic criticism. For example, the Czech Communist Party issued in January 1996 a harsh critique of Czech units' participation in IFOR, calling it a 'mercenary contingent' of an army that is inadequate and unable to fulfill its mandate<sup>10</sup>. The Hungarian debate focused on the issue of guarantees for units participation in IFOR<sup>11</sup>.

The Un decision to impose an *arms embargo* on the former Yugoslavia was received with mixed emotions in Central Europe<sup>12</sup>. However, following the decision, all the Central European countries, but especially the former Yugoslavia's neighbors, officially spoke out in favor of retaining it, as they feared a spread of the conflict. A number of countries was accused however of breaching the embargo. Following the UN Security Council decision to lift the arms embargo against former Yugoslavia, all Central European countries

decided to continue the policy of not exporting arms to that are, following the EU's example, which continued to uphold it as part of its policy of conditionality<sup>13</sup>.

The Central European countries also decided to support the international community's resolution to impose *sanctions on Serbia and Montenegro*. However, the degree of backing varied according to the extent to which these measures could hurt that country's economy. Countries suffering substantial damage to their economies as a result of sanctions requested, unsuccessfully, to be compensated indirectly by the international community. Ultimately, all of Serbia's neighbors wanted a reassessment of the sanctions policy in light of the stalled peace process and the damaging effect to their own economies<sup>14</sup>.

An even more controversial issue has been *intervention* and even *threat of intervention* in the form of ultimatum. Here again. The countries in question did not have a common position. The Czech government has been split on the issue of intervention, with Premier Vaclav Klaus opposed to external interference, and President Vaclav Klaus calling for decisive action. The Czech Foreign Ministry, Slovakia and Poland were fast in expressing support for NATO air strikes, considering this decision to be a somewhat belated confirmation of the credibility of UN attempts to settle the situation in former Yugoslavia peacefully.

The most interesting case has been Hungary, which experienced contradictory pressures. On the one hand, it supported the idea of quick intervention by NATO, on the other it attempted to appear neutral, due to concerns over Hungarian minority in Vojvodina and a potential wave of migration<sup>15</sup>. Hungary experienced a large and continuously rising influx of illegal refugees from former Yugoslavia. The Hungarian government decided in the aftermath of the Dayton agreement not to receive persons seeking temporary refuge from the former Yugoslavia any more<sup>16</sup>.

Prior to the Dayton agreement, the Hungarian government has, informally and unsuccessfully, requested security guarantees and help with minority issues from both the WEU and EC/EU, organizations with which it cooperated closely in the Balkans. After the January 1994 NATO summit Hungary decided that the presence of AWACs in its airspace had no 'double meaning', and that its interests would be better served if it distanced itself from the NATO ultimatum. That decision was made despite WEU's implicit security guarantees<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. Consequences of the Yugoslav case for Central European policies

#### 3.1. Implications for Central European approaches toward international organizations

In Central European's eyes, the various organisations' reputations suffered different degrees of bruising in former Yugoslavia. The precedent of UN's involvement in Europe combined with the lack of formal security guarantees in Central Europe means that it is first of all the UN which is responsible for military crisis management in the Central European region. This situation is clearly unsatisfactory to Central Europeans, yet has been a change in attitudes after NATO has been used to back up UN resolutions. In the opinion of Central Europeans, NATO won the Balkan 'popularity contest'. It demonstrated its viability over European institutions because of the perceived importance of US leadership, quicker decision-making processes, and its military capability. The fact that European and North-Atlantic organisations operated in UNPROFOR under a UN mandate, which gave Russia an implicit veto over what NATO, WEU or the EU did, made close cooperation between the west and Russia vital for Central Europeans. The Russian involvement in IFOR was less controversial due to the different arrangements made between NATO and Russia. The IFOR mechanisms which allowed Central European countries to take part in NATO operation were welcomed.

The WEU suffered from a lack of visibility in the Balkans and has been perceived as suitable for some less demanding tasks such as implementing sanctions or establishing a police force on Mostar. The WEU-NATO rivalry over the Adriatic naval patrol from mid-1992 was perceived as a dangerous development, as Central Europeans are concerned about any duplications of, and clashes with, NATO efforts. The WEU is considered interesting mainly because of its Maastricht link to both NATO and EU.

The EU is perceived as the definite loser in this organizational contest, particularly when even its mediating role has been implicitly called into question by Central Europeans observing American and Russian efforts<sup>18</sup>. Because of EU's lack of own military capabilities and slow decision-making mechanisms, it is in current form not seen by Central Europeans as able to deal with already destabilized, conflict-ridden areas. Central Europeans see the EU and the WEU as a low-key framework for operational cooperation. Central Europe favors the development of a stronger defence aspect in the EU/WEU, but not if means duplicating efforts of or diluting NATO, or weakening ties to the US. Nevertheless, the EU still promises the opportunity to stabilize economies, and therefore EU membership continues to be sought after by Central European governments, and its role in reconstruction of former Yugoslavia is acknowledged.

Whether as a result of the Yugoslav crisis or not, Central European governments have decided that the most effective method is to get inside

Western institutions and organisations first and then to participate in adjusting rules and operating procedures that have been exposed during the Yugoslav crisis as inadequate. Simultaneously, during the course of the Yugoslav conflict, Central Europeans came to believe that the existence of actual structures for collective action is less important than the presence of common will and thus that no new organisations are needed but that existing ones must be used better. That reasoning was extended to the European Stability Pact proposal. It was argued that Europe needs a debate about how to speed up and enforce decisions made by existing structures; it does not require yet another security conference.

### 3.2. Regional Implications

Western Europe's hesitant involvement in former Yugoslavia was interpreted by Central Europeans to be largely a result of confusion over Western strategic interests in the Balkans in particular and in Central and Eastern Europe in general. This situation affects Central Europe's sense of security.

The Yugoslav crisis has not had the effect of consolidating the Central European countries as a group. Indeed, the lack of coordination and lack of agreement among Central European states regarding their Balkan policies shows that there is no such thing as a 'Central European Basket'.

A further implication is that some Central European countries' foreign policy priorities are no longer entirely based on support for Western schemes, but begin to take into account risks involved in following them. Simultaneously, a change in Central European governments' attitudes towards Serbia was noticeable. From 1992 on, Central European countries practically froze their relations with Serbia and Montenegro. But while Poland and other countries that were not immediate of the former Yugoslavia were seen by Serbia as more or less neutral in the conflict, countries such as Hungary, which were geographically much closer and have minorities on the territory of the former Yugoslavia experienced tensions. The early attempts to improve relations with Serbia, particularly on the part of Hungary, were not necessarily explainable with attempts to correct perceived Western partiality, but rather a slow realization, particularly among neighbors, that they will have to live with a powerful Serbia following the conflict. Even in Poland, the opinion was voiced occasionally that in the early stages of the Yugoslav conflict, Poland committed a mistake by following 'the pro-Croat policy of Western Europe'. As a result, it was argued, Polish reputation in the Balkans has been tarnished<sup>19</sup>. The Central European ambiguous policies have been perceived as disappointing by other successor states, such as Slovenia, which hoped for more support.

After the suspension of sanctions against FRY, all Central Europeans countries made efforts to improve diplomatic and economic relations with Serbia Montenegro. Central European governments complain that after a break of

four years, trade relations are slow in picking up-mainly companies in FRY have financial problems, and because of "red tape". Nevertheless, they are expected to grow considerably<sup>20</sup>, and given priority in the new bilateral relations between countries of Central Europe and FRY. For example, Czechs hope for restoration of economic relations with FRY with trade reaching up to 1 billion dollars in 1997<sup>21</sup>, and Slovaks with up to 400 million dollars in 1996<sup>22</sup>. Diplomatic relations are maintained at a so called "middle level". Discussions began on legal bases of relations, including the issue of agreements and treaties signed by the former Yugoslavia and Central European countries. Central European countries support the notion of reintegration of FRY into multilateral organisations<sup>23</sup>.

There are also first attempts at cooperation with the Yugoslav military on the part of Hungary. During a visit to Belgrade the Defence Minister of Hungary suggested that what is needed first is "military confidence-building opportunities, such as liaison between corps or advance notification about military exercises near the border and similar things which could bring about an improvement in the relations between the two countries"<sup>24</sup>. The Hungarian minister suggested that the two sides undertake to maintain contacts between border-zone units and to notify one another in advance of military exercises and mobilization near the border, as well as extent the no-fly zone over the common border as part of confidence building measures<sup>25</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusion: Implications for Europe and its Organisations**

Central Europeans assessed the Western European involvement in the former Yugoslavia as delayed and largely inadequate<sup>26</sup>. They attributed this to the Western organizations' lack of ability to cope with the crisis, based on disagreements among Western powers, lack of proven mechanisms of coordination between European and Euro-Atlantic structures, as well as their lack of commitment to the region. Nevertheless, they chose to pursue reactive policies, based on following decisions made by international organisations in which they hope to become members.

One should not overstate the current significance of the Yugoslav case for Central European relations with EU and WEU. Firstly, the issue of Western European involvement in the Balkans is but one issue currently being pondered in the context of the Central European security debate. Secondly, Central European administrations are aware that currently, there is no alternative to integration with Western institutions and organizations.

Consequently, the region's countries to pursue a catch-all strategy, believing that membership in any of the organisations will provide either security or economic stabilization. Central Europeans concluded from the Yugoslav case that no new organisations are necessary, but that the existing ones' operating procedures must be adjusted. Thus, currently, no dramatic short-term impacts on Central European foreign policies are noticeable, but there is a

growing reluctance to blindly follow Western initiatives and changes in domestic equilibrium which could in the long-term affect these countries' foreign policies.

Confusing as Central European policies seem at first glance, they are rooted in Central European countries' feeling of insecurity caused by lack of security guarantees. Western organisations have given only implicit guarantees to countries surrounding former Yugoslavia (and have not had to back them up in deeds so far). The occasional Central European reluctance to go along with West's initiatives has been interpreted as a response to 'the weakness of Western half-hearted expansion plans'<sup>27</sup>.

For Central Europe, the issue of security guarantees is of great significance. In this context, the Balkan crisis confirmed to Central Europeans that the EU cannot provide security guarantees, although it has a useful economic role to play but that NATO is the only viable security institution. But their emphasis on participation in UNPROFOR and IFOR as an undertaking bringing them closer to NATO membership has been critically assessed by some observers. Jeffrey Simon, speaking of criteria for NATO enlargement, suggests that although lessons learned from cooperation such as IFOR will be of importance to NATO allies' decisions on enlargement<sup>28</sup>, they must be prudent in drawing conclusions, not only because peacekeeping may be only an aspect of cooperation, but also because, as he says, the following factors are important:

- i.) The extent to which Partner military establishments have consulted civilian authorities prior to joining IFOR.
- ii.) The extent IFOR participation has delayed other necessary internal reforms
- iii.) The degree to which budgetary distortions have occurred in Partner's economic plans<sup>29</sup>.

In fact, James Sherr warns that the ability to pursue peacekeeping, search and rescue and humanitarian operations under the NATO umbrella "may paradoxically divert energies". The allocations of NATO candidates for peacekeeping are disproportionately high in their defence budgets. The participation of non-NATO countries in operations such as IFOR, which many contributors hope will bring them closer to NATO membership-may in fact have the opposite effect. This form of cooperation, if successful, may "make enlargement unnecessary"<sup>30</sup>.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup>This paper represents an updated version of Monika Wholfeld, "Implications for relations between Western and Central Europe", *Chaillot Papers 17, The Implications of the Yugoslav Crisis for Western Europe's Foreign Relations*, October 1994.

<sup>2</sup> "Hungarian defence minister meets Yugoslav counterpart", BBC SWB EE 2517, 24 January 1996, p. A8

---

<sup>3</sup> "Second Report to the United Nations Security Council on IFOR Operations", covering the period between 22 December 1995 and 18 January 1996.

<sup>4</sup> See for example "Defence Minister says IFOR units may be too expensive", BBC SWB EE 2506, 13 January 1996, p. C2, "President says IFOR troops are not mercenaries", BBC SWB EE 2512, 18 January 1996, p. C1."Hungary presents request for talks on NATO admission conditions", BBC SWB EE 2523, 31 January 1996, p. C4.

<sup>5</sup> "Hungary presents request for talks on NATO admission conditions", BBC SWB EE 2523, 31 January 1996, p. C4.

<sup>6</sup> "Russia requests rail transit for IFOR troops", BBC SWB EE 2512, 18 January 1996, p. C6

<sup>7</sup> "Official clarifies status of IFOR base", BBC SWB EE 2539, 19 February 1996, p. C7.

<sup>8</sup> "Defence minister on US troops in Hungary", BBC SWB EE 2543, 23 February 1996, p. C3.

<sup>9</sup> "Romanian spending on Partnership for Peace", BBC SWB EE 2583, 11 April 1996, p. B3. In January 1996, the Slovak Defence Minister Jan Sitek estimated the costs of his country's participation in IFOR to be 830 million US dollars. See "Defence Minister says IFOR units may be too expensive", BBC SWB EE 2506, 13 January 1996, p. C2.

<sup>10</sup> "Communists critical of Czech Army and its IFOR mission", BBC SWB EE 2508, 13 January 1996, p. C1

<sup>11</sup> "Foreign Minister NATO to guarantee safety of unit". BBC SWB EE 2504, 98 January 1996, p. C3.

<sup>12</sup> This way partly due to moral concerns, and partly because some of the Central European countries saw themselves in a difficult position where arms purchases were concerned.

<sup>13</sup> "Czech Republic not to export arms to former Yugoslavia", BBC SWB EE 2574, 30 March 1996, p. C1.

<sup>14</sup> For Romanian reactions see BBC SWB EE, 6 April 1994; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 5 April 1994. Hungary's government indicated as well that it would not be opposed to lifting sanctions. *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 February 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Bosnian refugees in Hungary are partly funded by the UN, but according to the Hungarian government, the financial burden on the country is still considerable.

<sup>16</sup> "Hungary to revise conditions for new refugees", BBC SWB EE 2509, 15 January 1996, p. C5

<sup>17</sup> The WEU *Communique* published in the aftermath of the meeting of the WEU Forum for Consultation at ministerial level which took place in Rome on 20 May 1993 mentions that "ministers... agreed that, were any country to suffer from aggressive action as a consequence of their support for UN-mandated operations, this would be a matter of direct concern to the international community".

<sup>18</sup> There is a conspicuous absence of references to European organisations in statements issued by Central European ministries since the success of the Sarajevo ultimatum. See for example, *BBS SWB EE*, 23 February 1994.

<sup>19</sup> "Nie warto umierac za Gorazde" (Not worth it to die for Gorazde), *Rzeczpospolita*, 20 April 1994.

<sup>20</sup>

"Hungary and Yugoslavia sign trade agreement", BBC SWB EE C4.

<sup>21</sup> "Yugoslav and Czech premiers discuss economic and diplomatic issues", BBC SWB EE 2553, 6 March 1996, p. A8.

<sup>22</sup> "Yugoslav and Slovak prime minister's hope for "greatest possible" cooperation", BBC SWB EE 2523, 31 January 1996, p. A8.

<sup>23</sup> See for example "Slovakia and Yugoslavia agree to renew diplomatic relations", BBC SWB EE 2525, 2 February 1996, p. A12;"Czech premier says Czech-Yugoslav trade accord may be signed this year", BBC SWB EE 2553, 6 March 1996, p. A7

<sup>24</sup> "Hungary wants to establish closer links with Yugoslav military", BBC SWB EE 2517, 24 January 1996, p. A8.

<sup>25</sup> "Hungarian Defence minister meets Yugoslav counterpart", BBC SWB EE 2517, 24 January 1996, p. A8.

<sup>26</sup> See for example *Address* by Hanna Suchocka to the *Council of Europe*, 13 May 1993.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Sunley, "Hungary Struggles With East Europe's Security Vacuum", *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 February 1994.

---

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Simon, "Post-NATO Enlargement: The need for a strategy", *Defence Studies, Special Edition: A Close-up View of European Security*, 1996, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96

<sup>30</sup> James Sherr, "Armed Forces in Central Europe: Reform without Direction", *Conflict Studies Research Centre G53*, June 1996, p. 4.