

Csaba SZOMBATH

**CHANGING PUBLIC ATTITUDES IN HUNGARY ABOUT
THE INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION OF THE MILITARY FOLLOWING
THE NATO ACCESSION**

**A HADERŐ NEMZETKÖZI INTEGRÁCIÓJÁVAL KAPCSOLATOS LAKOSSÁGI
ATTITŰDÖK VÁLTOZÁSA MAGYARORSZÁGON A NATO-CSATLAKOZÁST KÖVETŐEN**

The existence of Hungary as a sovereign state may be called into question in retrospect in many respects, when one reflects on the history of past centuries.¹ From the early 1500s on² we encounter a number of cases where the most we can say is that the sovereignty of the country existed in name only. Hungary's territorial integrity, the national boundaries and the autonomy of certain parts or the whole were almost always in a state of continuing uncertainty throughout this period, virtually until the end of the bipolar world system. In connection with this, on a historical scale it would be more appropriate to speak about the temporary possession of certain military capabilities than about the military³ or the armed forces⁴ in the classical sense of the term. The reason for this is that Hungary has not had an autonomous military force that would be able to safeguard her territorial integrity for several centuries. In all likelihood, the chances of establishing such an organization in the future are negligible, even though some pressure groups keep trying to make us believe otherwise. The transformed security environment, the security-related needs of the population, the economic capacity of the country and our NATO membership do not make it necessary to build up a military force in the classic sense of the term.

A national referendum held on 16 November 1997 in Hungary decided that our country should join NATO. For the majority of Hungarian people, the issue of membership meant that they are to share a set of common values and interests and, especially, enter the antechamber to accession to the European Union as well. The referendum was about another two important factors, namely rationality and confidence. Rationality means that the result rendered the independent establishment of certain military capabilities unnecessary, which is clearly a cost-effective solution. Confidence means that it was precisely the trust in our allies that made it possible for the sovereign Hungarian state formed by the change of regime to do without establishing a military force in the classic sense of the term. In the absence of confidence, in spite of all its rationality, a decision like this would amount to nothing less than risking our national sovereignty.

As no current political power can take over this responsibility from the citizens, the issue was put to a referendum, because the electorate had to approve the accession.

With special respect to the particularities of Hungarian history, we can say that the build-up of this kind of trust was the result of a longer process. Public confidence in the NATO membership was built on a nearly five-year long public affairs campaign, the ensuing nationwide dialogue and the resulting common value system. Confidence has a very fragile existence, however, since the rapidity of its erosion is comparable to the slowness of its development.

¹ István Nemeskürty: Magyar Századok (Hungarian Centuries) Szabad Tér Ltc, 2006.

² The authors disputing the existence of the state refer to King Matthias' death in 1490 or the defeat at Mohács in 1526.

³ „The military”: the entirety of the armed forces set up for the defenses of a given state.”

⁴ „armed forces’ (the military): an umbrella term for the military organizations safeguarding the security and defending the interests, territory and sovereignty of a given state.”

NATIONAL REFERENDUM ON NATO MEMBERSHIP

The national referendum on NATO accession held on 16 November 1997 had been the first plebiscite since the change of regime. Article 28/C (§6) of the Constitution stipulates that the national referendum is successful provided more than half of those citizens who cast valid votes give identical answers to the question at hand, and also that the threshold majority is a quarter of the whole electorate.⁵ Turnout rates are the key factor at national referendums, while the citizens' yes or no votes to a given question are only of secondary importance. What is really at stake is the aggregate number of actual voters, because without a sufficient voter turnout the referendum would be unsuccessful, and so it would not be considered legislatively binding. Therefore, according to the Constitution, the national referendum is unsuccessful if at least 25% of the eligible voters hold divergent opinions. Accordingly, in an extreme case where all the actual voters give identical answers to a question but the turnout rate is under 25% the national referendum would be unsuccessful. However, when the opinions about a given issue are extremely divided, which means that there are around 50 percentage points to each side, more than 50% of the whole electorate has to turn out and cast valid votes to make the referendum successful.⁶ The foregoing means that completely irrespective of the answers, a referendum in Hungary is guaranteed to be successful only if more than half of the whole electorate cast valid votes. During the past few years this required more than four million actual voters.

The number of eligible voters totalled 8 059 039 at the time of the national referendum on NATO membership held on 16 November 1997. The actual turnout was 49.24% (3 968 668 persons). As the turnout rate was under 50%, the principle of minimums had to apply in order to produce a valid result. Thus at least 25% (2 014 760 persons) of the eligible voters had to cast identical and valid ballots for a successful outcome. The question submitted to the electorate was „Do you agree that the Hungarian Republic should join NATO to secure the country's defenses?“, and 85.33% (3 344 131 persons) of the validly voting participants answered in the affirmative. Therefore, the referendum was declared successful. The main data are shown in the pie chart below.

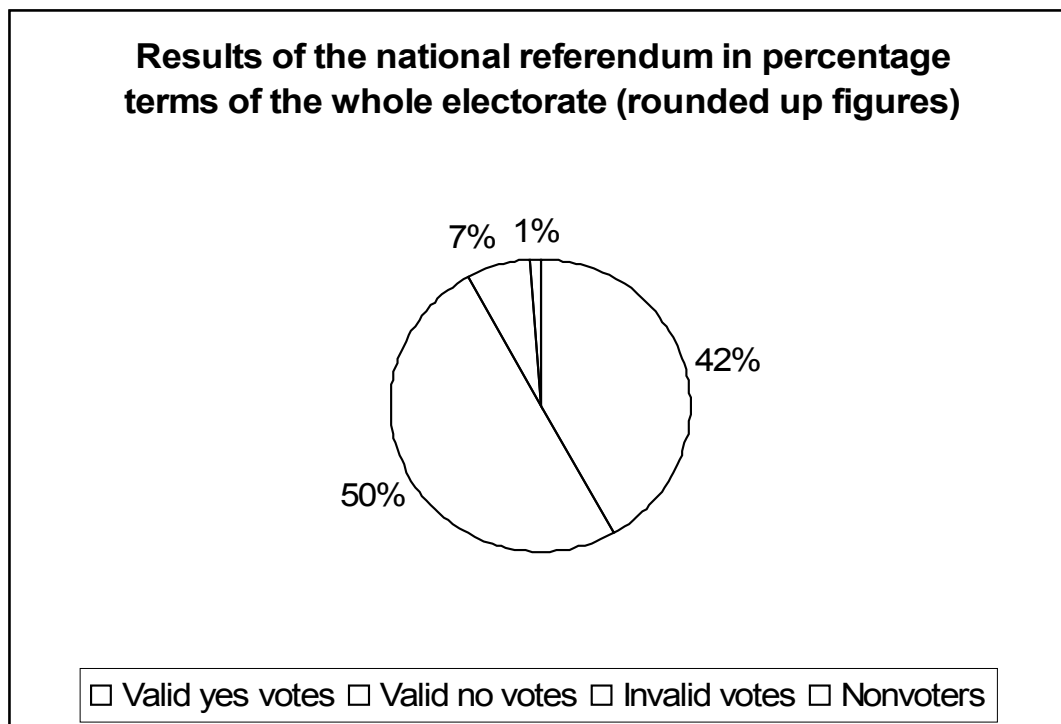


Figure 1 (Source: National Election Office)

⁵ Act on the Constitution of the Hungarian Republic

⁶ The lessons of the referendum so far show that the percentage of invalid votes may exceed or approximate 1%.

It is worth noting that, when broken down to separate county-level constituencies, the percentage of voters considerably diverged from the grand mean (49.24%), being generally higher in more developed areas. The turnout rate peaked in Budapest (57.13%), while it reached a trough in Szabolcs county (40.09%). The table below summarizes the turnout data, which are broken down to county-level geographical areas.

REFERENDUM DATA BROKEN DOWN TO AREAS (REGIONAL TOTALS)			
County	Constituency	Turnout	Turnout rate (%)
Total	8 059 039	3 968 668	49,24
Budapest	1 490 130	851 326	57,13
Baranya	325 153	166 294	51,14
Bács	431 561	185 415	42,96
Békés	322 527	143 111	44,37
Borsod	584 662	287 155	49,11
Csongrád	340 020	156 021	45,89
Fejér	330 248	162 745	49,28
Győr	339 710	183 593	54,04
Hajdú	426 776	175 952	41,23
Heves	262 855	129 671	49,33
Jász	334 159	149 154	44,64
Komárom	245 498	126 230	51,42
Nógrád	177 160	86 607	48,89
Pest	791 524	376 960	47,62
Somogy	268 647	127 341	47,40
Szabolcs	439 367	176 146	40,09
Tolna	199 130	94 635	47,52
Vas	214 077	114 857	53,65
Veszprém	295 995	158 614	53,59
Zala	239 840	116 841	48,72

Figure 2 (Source: National Election Office)

At the same time, there was a general correlation between high turnout rates (higher than 50%) and the number of votes in favor of the membership, which is illustrated in figure 3.

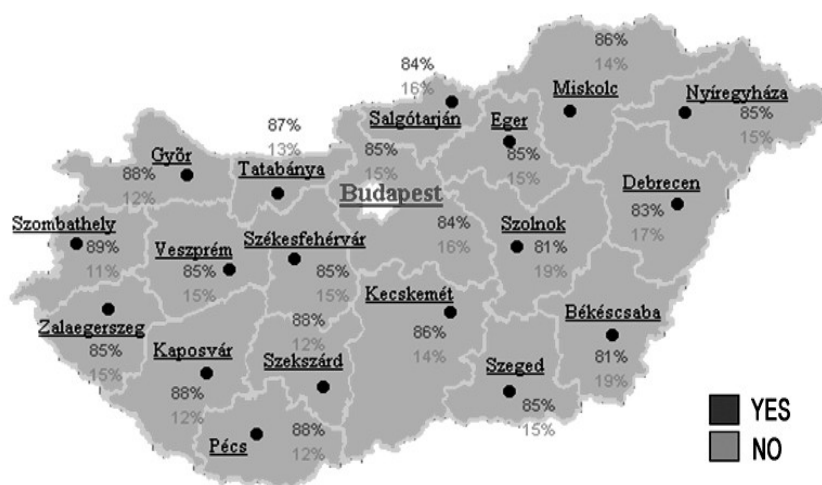


Figure 3 (Source: National Election Office)

We may conclude that the turnout rate and the corresponding support for NATO membership were to some extent higher in the more developed regions.

HOW THE SUPPORT FOR NATO MEMBERSHIP CHANGED AFTER THE REFERENDUM

The Ministry of Defense set out to analyse the public opinion about international integration again in the fifth year following the national referendum. There was a growing need for research into the issue, since concurrent with the reduced degree of security risks in consequence of our neighbours' joining NATO, the allied expectations and requirement levels for the international engagement of the Hungarian Defense Forces were gradually rising.⁷ The capability needed to conduct international operations has left the virtual realm and entered the real world, but the associated costs, when combined with the reduced direct risks to national security, may engender contradictions and difficulties of comprehension in the public at large. „Seen from a political perspective, the relevant facts – firstly, that all of our neighbours are members of NATO or the European Union (or again, they are striving to develop friendly cooperation with these organizations), and secondly, that Hungary is a member of a collective defense system – allowed us to streamline the Hungarian Defense Forces to a significant extent over the past decade. Still, from the political point of view, NATO's continual initiatives, recommendations and requirement setting have a sort of curbing effect, which means we cannot downsize the HDF to the extent that some political actors in Hungary would like to see. We may call this pair of conflicting effects the paradox of our NATO membership ...” (Szenes, 2007).

The research results clearly show the impact of the just mentioned paradox on the population in connection with our NATO membership. The results of an opinion poll conducted in September 2002 had already reflected the changes that occurred since the referendum. If we compare the percentage of those who had actually voted in favour of our NATO membership (around 85%) with those in favour of membership according to the survey carried out in 2002 (77%) we can see a significant drop (8%). The results of the surveys conducted in the following years show a decreasing tendency in the number of supporters over the ensuing decade since the referendum. Figure 4 illustrates the point.

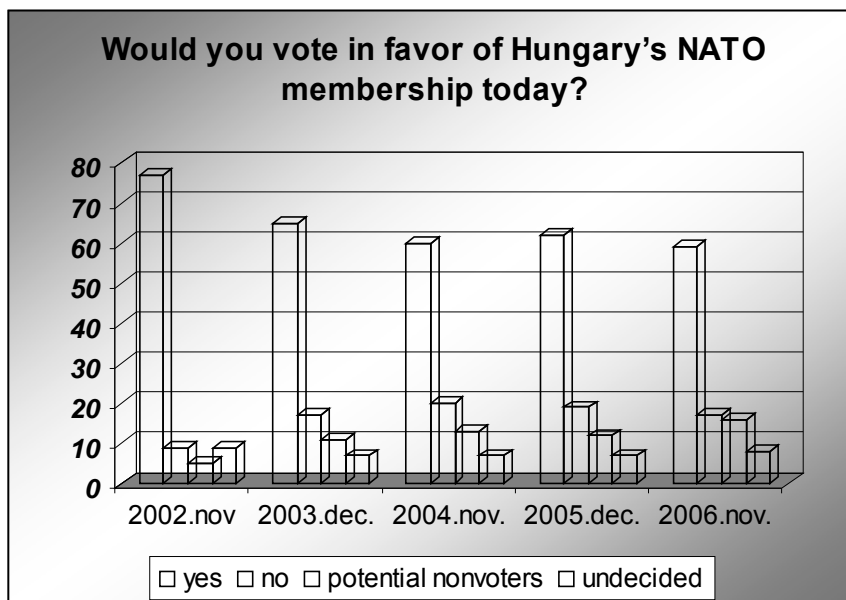


Figure 4 (Source: data from opinion polls conducted by ECHO Survey, commissioned by the MoD Communications Department)

As the above bar chart shows, although the majority support remained by the end of 2006, the percentage of supporters decreased by 18% during the five-year research period, which means that the overall percentage of supporters dropped by 26% over the nearly ten-year-period since the referendum. The opinion poll data indicate a

relative leveling off since 2004. Considering the average of the last three years, the percentage of supporters has been hovering around 60%, that of the dissenters around 19% while that of the waverers around 7%. At the same

⁷ The terrorist attack on the USA on 11 September 2001 and the lessons learnt in the Balkan peacekeeping operations gave a new momentum to the tasks of the NATO transformation process. Thus the issues concerning capability development initiatives and the decision to expand the alliance were high on the agenda of the Prague Summit in November 2002.

time, the percentage of non-voters that started from an original 7% reached 16% by the end of 2006, which means that a repeated referendum might surprisingly prove to be unsuccessful, taking account of the fact that the group of supporters expands in correspondence with the increase in the turnout. This allows us to conclude that first and foremost, the so-called „NATO paradox” influences not the political decision-makers but rather the citizens they are supposed to represent. This all suggests that to understand its effects, we need to carry out a more accurate in-depth analysis of the changes in the public attitudes in the first instance. The reason for this is that in a normally working democracy, political decision-makers tend to act on the perceived needs, goals and demands of the majority of the population, and with respect to the NATO membership issue this majority seems to be melting away gradually.

BACKGROUND REASONS FOR A DECLINING SUPPORT FOR NATO MEMBERSHIP

As we have seen, public opinion about Hungary's NATO membership has changed a lot over the past ten years, as there has been a significant decline in support among the population. The analysis of the referendum data suggested that the degree of support was higher in the economically more developed regions.

The research results also clearly indicate that support rates are higher in the economically developed regions. Furthermore, the percentage of the supporters of NATO membership is above average among people who are active entrepreneurs, have higher education levels or are on higher incomes (for instance the relevant percentage is 69% among those who have a degree). The lowest grade of support (49 to 51%) was measured among those on low incomes, while the rate of wavers is the highest among them. Therefore the question of how people are actually forming their opinions about our NATO membership is inextricably bound up with the indices related to the other security needs of the population, in particular social security. Those who have a low social status tend to unequivocally disapprove of our NATO membership or show more indecision about it at the very least. This result is corroborated by the different opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of our NATO membership. The following chart shows how the respondents answered the question „Does Hungary's membership in NATO bring advantages rather than disadvantages?”

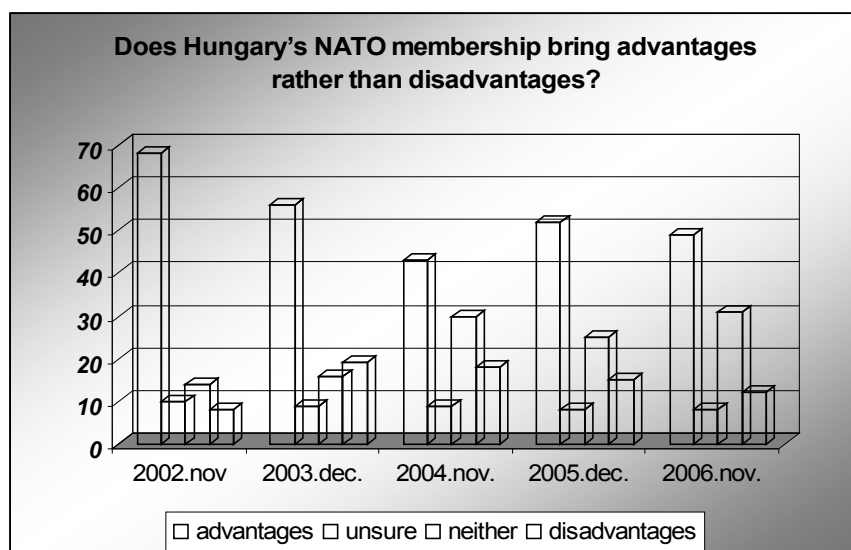


Figure 5 (Source: data from opinion polls conducted by ECHO Survey, commissioned by the MoD Communications Department)

The chart shows that 68% of the respondents in 2002 opined that membership would rather bring advantages. The data gathered in late 2006 indicate that the percentage of those deeming the membership to be advantageous dropped to 49%, which is a decrease of nearly

19% over five years. The internal proportions of the answers are similar to those given to the question about NATO membership: the percentage of those who hold a positive opinion and think that all things considered, our NATO membership is advantageous is above average among men, people with higher education levels or higher incomes and young people.

Nevertheless, one is bound to see a drastic decline in the poll results during 2003 and 2004, as the indicator went up from the trough of 43% measured in 2004 again, to level off at around 50%. Similarly to the prevailing public

opinion in other EU member states throughout the low period, the majority of Hungarian people disapproved of the US military offensive against Iraq, and unlike in the case of other peace support operations, the citizens of our country were sharply divided over the issue whether Hungary should commit troops to the NATO peacekeeping mission in Iraq. The 2004 May terrorist attacks in Madrid, the ensuing Spanish troop withdrawal and the death of a soldier serving with the HDF Transport Battalion in June 2004 decisively turned away the Hungarian public from the HDF engagement in Iraq. These events finally led to the withdrawal of the Hungarian contingent upon the expiry of the mandate. From a narrow military point of view, the Hungarian participation in NATO peace operations in Iraq may be considered a success story, but in a wider context it has considerably diminished the Hungarian citizens' degree of commitment to the alliance.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF NATO MEMBERSHIP REFLECTED IN THE PUBLIC OPINION

The previous subsection has focused on some background variables that influence the degree of support for or opposition to our NATO membership. Among these, we have drawn attention to other aspects of security and, in connection with that, to the related factors that have a fundamental influence on how people make their living (e.g. regional connections, education level, income). We have also analysed the diverging public opinions about Hungary's military involvement in the alliance, and the effects of the HDF participation in operations without public support on the opinions about our NATO membership.

We now turn to the task of analysing public opinion about the advantages and disadvantages of our NATO membership on the basis of the research results, by considering the stabilization of the relevant data in 2006. The numbers of times when the items below were mentioned in answers to the following open-ended question show the public opinion about this issue.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF HUNGARY'S MEMBERSHIP IN NATO? (open-ended question)			
<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Number of times when item was mentioned</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>	<i>Number of times when item was mentioned</i>
Defense	119	It costs too much, too expensive	123
Security	67	Obligations, regulations	39
Less expensive, streamlined armed forces	22	NATO involves us in every conflict (Iraq)	26
NATO can protect us	21	Our troops may be mobilized any time	20
Technology upgrade, renewing HDF	18	We are called on to deploy our troops if the need arises	19
We can get assistance when we are in trouble	11	We are not authorized to make decisions on our own	14
National defense	8	We need to assist other states as well	11
We look more powerful to the world	8	We have submitted to US interests	7
NATO protects our country against attacks	7	We are facing threats	3
The costs are shared evenly	7	Economic reasons	3
We can trust in NATO	4	We have to build radar stations; environmental damage	3

Membership furthers Hungary's development	4	More obligations	3
We belong to an organization; joint forces	3	We are a small nation	3
Our neighbors are also member states; border guard duties	3	Proportional contribution	2
Joining forces with more developed countries	3	Terrorist threat	2

Figure 6 (Source: data from opinion polls conducted by ECHO Survey, commissioned by the MoD Communications Department)

One of the most important positive opinions about NATO is that the system of collective defense will ensure Hungary's security if our country comes under attack. The bulk of those questioned was fully aware of this specific argument. On a 100 point scale the respondents assigned this guarantee a rating of 70 in 2003, 64 in 2004 and 2005, while 63 in 2006. This value is higher among men, more educated people and those on higher incomes. Characteristically, both those who consider the HDF an important organization and those who prefer the all-volunteer force to the compulsory conscript service have more confidence in NATO's security guarantees as well. At the same time, among the negative opinions about NATO we find the expenditures associated with the membership at the top. A significant percentage of the respondents feel that the membership costs Hungary too much. This may be related to the second critical opinion, which has it that the alliance imposes excessive demands. However, the negative feelings about the Hungarian engagement in the Iraqi operations and its negative influence on the public opinion about NATO membership still popped up at the third place in late 2006. The impact that the „NATO paradox” exerts on the population is discernible again in the different opinions about advantages and disadvantages. As we have seen, first and foremost this contradiction concerns the tension between security and defense on the one hand and the costs and requirements on the other.

To obtain a clearer picture of this phenomenon, it is worth noticing the percentage distribution of opinions about NATO membership illustrated in the chart below.

Public opinion about NATO membership

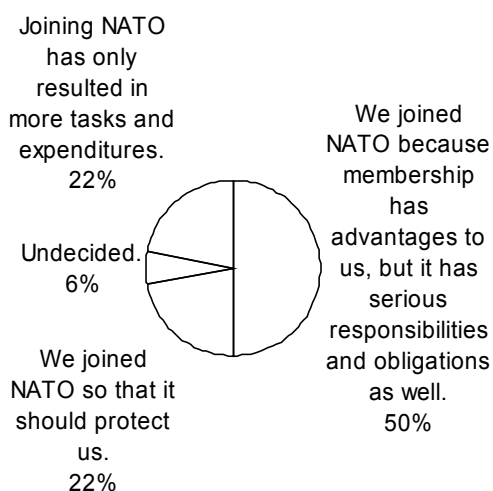


Figure 7 (Source: data from opinion polls conducted by ECHO Survey, commissioned by the MoD Communications Department)

Half of the Hungarian citizens still concur with the view that we have joined NATO because it has advantages to us but at the same time we have taken on heavy responsibilities and obligations too. This indicator has stayed approximately the same for years. The percentage of those who think this may be a one-sided relationship, that is, who think we have joined NATO to get protection (regardless of obligations) is 22%. Another 22% of the population characteristically considers the NATO membership basically disadvantageous for Hungary, and most of these people disapprove of our NATO membership as well. In their view, Hungary's accession to NATO has only increased the amount of our tasks and expenditures. Based on the main demographic indices, it can be shown that the dramatic rise (from 37% to 58%) in the number of respondents who

disapprove of our NATO membership as well. In their view, Hungary's accession to NATO has only increased the amount of our tasks and expenditures. Based on the main demographic indices, it can be shown that the dramatic rise (from 37% to 58%) in the number of respondents who

see the situation realistically (that is, who think that our membership has advantages and obligations alike) correlates with higher education levels. Just the reverse is true for age, as 58% of young people are able to see the advantages and obligations as closely related, while this percentage is only 41% among those over 60.

Since we have the issues of defense and security on one side of this paradox, it will be worth looking into the degree of confidence among the population with respect to the allied capabilities that form the guarantee of security.

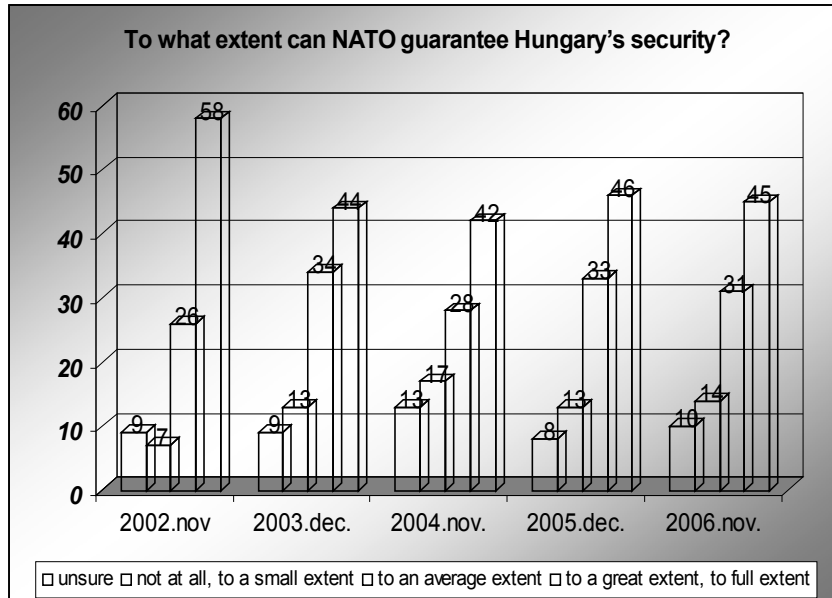


Figure 8 (Source: data from opinion polls conducted by ECHO Survey, commissioned by the MoD Communications Department)

Confidence in the security-generating capacity of the alliance has fallen to some extent over the past few years. While 58% of those questioned in 2002 considered NATO to be able to guarantee Hungary's security to full or to a great extent, only 45% of the respondents shared this opinion by the end of 2006, which amounts to a decrease

of 13%. We should add that, as our neighbours have joined the alliance, in the eyes of the population the issue of military-guaranteed security does not primarily boil down to our NATO membership anymore. Concurrent with this, nowadays the asymmetric threats seem a distant possibility to the citizens. Moreover, these days the effectiveness of the efforts that the alliance makes in responding to these challenges is often called into question (e.g. in the cases of Iraq-Madrid, and Serbia-Kosovo).

SUMMARY

Both the security environment and the alliance have changed to a significant extent since Hungary joined NATO. Other sectors of security are gradually overshadowing the importance of military security in the conventional sense of the term. Therefore, these days the public considers the issue of our NATO membership less important than it was thought to be a decade ago. Due to our country's geostrategic position, Hungarian citizens do not directly perceive the asymmetric challenges facing the alliance as a whole. If there is such a threat for the Hungarian population, its current risks are significantly lower than the others, for example the risks posed to social security. Thus, in the absence of direct security risks part of the Hungarian people find the costs of allied membership too high, while they do not support international operations in certain cases and question the effectiveness of the actual responses to asymmetric threats. In this connection, public confidence in the alliance and the support for integration both have declined to a significant extent, by more than 20 percentage points over the past few years. This loss of confidence remains significant in spite of the fact that the majority of Hungarian people are still in favor of our NATO membership and have confidence in the security guarantees NATO provides.

Hungary's accession to NATO was preceded by an intensive public awareness campaign and an ensuing nationwide dialogue. Following the national referendum, this public affairs program has considerably decreased in intensity, whereas the alliance has been undergoing a series of substantial transformations until the present day. Nowadays it would be inconceivable to resolve the existing paradox without launching an intensive public affairs

campaign, which should highlight the problems confronting the alliance as a whole and their possible solutions. Without that, the social trap generated by the paradox is bound to persist, which may undermine the majority support for our NATO membership and the fulfilment of the corresponding obligations in the long run.

Keywords: public attitudes, Hungary, integration, NATO, membership

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