UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO
INSTITUTO DE RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS

Lorena Jardim Vicari

Hungary's Role in NATO Enlargement (1990-1997)

How Hungary Acted as an Active Player in Shaping Its Own NATO Accession

São Paulo
2025

LORENA JARDIM VICARI

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Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Kai Enno Lehmann

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ABSTRACT

The first wave of NATO enlargement after the end of the Cold War, which resulted in the accession of Czechia, Hungary, and Poland in 1997, remains a central and widely debated topic in the study of Central European International Relations. While academic literature offers multiple interpretations and identifies different influential actors in this process, the specific role of Hungary has often been relatively overlooked. This research revisits this period to examine Hungary's proactive domestic and foreign policy directed towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Through this analysis, the study argues that Hungary was not merely a passive recipient of Western strategic interests, but an active player that sought to shape its own security environment. By pursuing good relations with its neighbours, institutional reforms, and diplomatic alignment with NATO principles, Hungary successfully positioned itself as a credible candidate for membership, even amidst considerable hesitation towards the Alliance's expansion at the time.

Keywords: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; NATO enlargement; NATO expansion; Hungary; Hungarian Foreign Policy; József Antall; Triple Priority Foreign Policy; Central European International Relations.

RESUMO

A primeira onda de expansão da OTAN após o fim da Guerra Fria, que resultou na adesão da Chéquia, da Hungria e da Polônia em 1997, permanece um tema central e amplamente debatido no estudo das Relações Internacionais da Europa Central. Embora a literatura acadêmica apresente múltiplas explicações e identifique diferentes atores influentes nesse processo, o papel específico da Hungria ainda é relativamente pouco analisado. Esta pesquisa revisita esse período para examinar a política doméstica e externa proativa da Hungria neste período histórico voltada para a integração Euro-Atlântica. Com base nessa análise, este estudo argumenta que o país não foi apenas um receptor passivo dos interesses estratégicos Ocidentais, mas um ator ativo que buscou moldar seu futuro em termos de segurança e posicionar-se como um candidato credível à adesão à OTAN, mesmo diante da significativa oposição à expansão da aliança naquele momento.

Palavras-chave: Organização do Tratado do Atlântico Norte; Expansão da OTAN; Hungria; Política Externa Húngara; József Antall; Triple Priority Foreign Policy; Relações Internacionais da Europa Central.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CE	Central Europe
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
EU	European Union
DAHR	Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania
DOI	Digital Object Identifier
HCAS	Hungarian Cultural Association of Subcarpathia
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PfP	Partnership for Peace
SHAPE	Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States

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1 INTRODUCTION

Academic literature offers an extensive analysis of the motivations and main actors involved in the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War, defined by Frydrych (2008, p. 15) as the admission of Czechia[1], Hungary and Poland into the organization in 1999, after the formal invitation received in 1997. Nowadays, debates around this topic are even more prominent amid the war in Ukraine and the Russian narrative that the crisis emerged from NATO's expansion into its neighboring countries (Catalano, 2024, p. 57). Some scholars, such as Goldgeier (1998), McCgwire (1998), and Shifrinson (2020) argue that the process was primarily driven by the United States and NATO itself, motivated by different reasons ranging from American *realpolitik* moves to the Alliance's desire to ensure that the Central European countries - emerging from behind the Iron Curtain - would embrace democracy and contribute to stability in Europe.

Others, like Catalano (2024), contend that the initiative was largely led by the Central European countries themselves, with particular emphasis on the roles of Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa as symbolic figures of the process. Still others, such as Frydrych (2008), suggest that the enlargement was a two-sided effort: Central European countries sought NATO membership to strengthen their domestic and international positions, while NATO's support was shaped by strategic political considerations.

In this context, despite some references to Havel and Wałęsa as key figures in the process, relatively little attention has been given to József Antall's government - and those of his successor - in presenting Hungary as a suitable candidate for NATO membership. Nevertheless, as Kramer (2009, p. 43) highlights, not until the late spring of 1990 did any Central European official raise the question of dissolving the Warsaw Pact, with Antall - then elected the new Hungarian Prime Minister - being the first one to do so. Afterwards, concerns regarding the future of NATO began to rise among many members of the American administration since it represented a huge trade-off: ensuring that political and economic reforms in Central Europe would be accomplished at the risk of antagonizing Russia, which had just received billions of dollars to assist its democratic transition (Goldgeier, 1998, p. 85).

In this context, amid the deteriorating democratic situation in Russia, a small group

[1]For clarity, the term ''Czechia'' will be used when referring to events that took place after 1993, whereas ''Czechoslovakia'' will be employed for events occurring prior to that year, before Czechia and Slovakia became two different countries.

within the U.S. State Department argued in October 1993 that the Alliance should establish a clear criteria for an initial set of aspiring countries (Goldgeier, 1998, p. 88). This was accomplished in September 1995, when NATO published the *Study on NATO Enlargement,* which finally provided a more direct guidance for countries seeking closer integration with the organization and eventual recognition as membership candidates. Main points included the existence of a market economy, a functioning democratic political system, treatment of minority populations in accordance with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) guidelines, willingness to contribute militarily to the Alliance, resolution of disputes with neighbouring countries and commitment to keeping the door open to further enlargement (Frydrych, 2008, pp. 11-12).

Within this framework, there are still some gaps in the literature regarding the concrete steps Central European countries took to fulfill the criteria for NATO membership even before the *Study* was published. While the majority of the scholars argue that the enlargement process was primarily driven by the United States, this study aims to demonstrate that the candidate Central European countries actively shaped their own accession, using Hungary as a case study. Although landlocked, situated south of the Carpathian Mountains, and sharing a border with Yugoslavia, Hungary undertook a series of efforts to present itself as a credible candidate for the Alliance through domestic reforms aimed at democratization and a foreign policy strategy focused on Euro-Atlantic integration.

The period analyzed covers the years from 1990 to 1997, beginning with the first push for NATO to forge closer ties with Central European countries - which came from Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn on February 20, 1990 (Kramer 2009, p. 42) - and concluding with the formal invitation extended to the Central European countries to join the Alliance at the Madrid Summit on July 8-9, 1997. Hungary was chosen as a case study because of Horn's significant push, as well as it being the first country that had officially called for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (Kramer, 2009, p. 43). Combined with the relatively limited scholarship on Hungary's path towards the North Atlantic Alliance, these factors motivated a study that can also serve as a reference for examining the roles of other countries that joined the organization in shaping their own admission paths.

After a brief literature review of the period to assess the main arguments and criteria surrounding the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War, Hungarian domestic and foreign initiatives will be examined in greater depth within the framework of the so-called

Triple Priority Foreign Policy - unfortunately, never compiled in a single document (Szombati, 2007, p. 5) - initiated under Prime Minister József Antall (1990-1993) and further pursued by his successor, Gyula Horn (1994-1998). This policy rested on three pillars: (1) moral and political responsibility for Hungarian minorities beyond national borders; (2) the development of good relations with neighbouring countries; and (3) a commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration (Balogh, 1998). While the first goal might appear to conflict with the other two, this study examines how Hungary sought to reconcile these priorities to actively position itself as a credible NATO candidate, rather than merely a passive recipient of Western strategic interests. In this way, the Hungarian case illustrates that accession was not simply imposed from the outside, but was shaped by domestic agency and institutional values. As mentioned above, although this research focuses exclusively on Hungary, future studies could explore Czechia and Poland to reassess their roles in the same process, or consider other European countries to analyze subsequent rounds of NATO enlargement.

1.1 JUSTIFICATION

In the early 1990s, Kenneth N. Waltz observed that ‘’it is the Soviet threat that provides the glue that holds NATO together’’ (Frydrych, 2008, p. 4). However, more than three decades after the end of the Cold War, NATO’s continued expansion remains a highly relevant and widely debated topic, particularly in light of renewed tensions between Russia and the West, exemplified by the war in Ukraine and recent membership applications from Finland and Sweden. Within this context, since the literature often focuses on the United States’ role in NATO expansion, this research aims to offer new insights into the complexity of this process. Using a case study of a single country - examining how it shaped its domestic and foreign policies to meet the Alliance’s political, military, and institutional expectations - this study seeks to present NATO enlargement as a multifaceted, multi-actor phenomenon, shedding light on how each actor involved in the process can have its own historical and strategic interests to join the organization.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

Described below are the general and specific objectives that guide the development of this project:

1.2.1 General objective

The general objective of this research is to examine how the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War is portrayed in academic literature and to highlight the interests and proactive measures of Central European countries in pursuing NATO membership, using Hungary as a case study.

1.2.2 Specific objectives

In addition to the general objective, the following specific objectives provide a foundation for this research:

a) Identify which actors are most often considered responsible of influential in the first wave post-Cold War wave of NATO enlargement;

b) Understand a historical period that is highly relevant to contemporary Central European International Relations, particularly in the light of recent tensions between Russia and the West;

c) Examine the domestic and foreign initiatives undertaken by Hungary between 1990 and 1997 aimed at meeting NATO's membership criteria;

d) Reflect on the narratives that frame NATO expansion as a primarily United States-driven project, by demonstrating the proactive involvement and strategic interests of a candidate state.

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY:

This research adopts a two-phase, literature-based methodological approach based on a broad review of the most cited academic papers addressing the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War that also mention the Central European countries, followed by a more detailed examination of Hungary's domestic and foreign policies between 1990 and 1997. Together, these phases aim to develop both a comprehensive contextual understanding of the period and a focused, case-specific analysis of Hungary's role within this process.

The purpose of the first phase is to identify the main academic debates, interpretations, and geopolitical considerations that shaped this historical period. The review draws primarily

on established academic databases, including Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The search criteria included articles that specifically framed the 1990-1997 period, with international relevance and at least a verified DOI. The search terms used included ‘’Central Europe’’, ‘’Hungary’’, ‘’fist wave’’, ‘’NATO enlargement’’, ‘’NATO expansion’’, and ‘’post-Cold War’’ in different combinations. Preference was given to works written in English, given the predominance of English-language sources in International Relations literature. In total, twelve academic sources were selected and examined to address three main questions: (1) which actor does the author identify as the most influential in the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War?; (2) what does the author say about the roles of Czechia, Poland, and particularly Hungary within this process?; and (3) what were the main criteria to join the Alliance by that time?

Subsequently, to analyze Hungary’s participation in and perception of the enlargement process, this study relies on the works of Hare (1991), Racz (1991), and Barany (1997) to assess the country’s domestic reforms. It then turns to the works of Butler (2007), Balogh (1998), Edwards (1997), and Blinken (2007), as well as documents and recordings of NATO joint communiqués between 1990 and 1997, to examine how Hungary shaped its foreign policy to meet the remaining necessary requirements outlined in the *Study on NATO Enlargement* (1995). This part of the research adopts the same criteria as the broad literature review, with adjustments to the search parameters. The main key words used were ‘’Antall’’, ‘’József Antall’’, ‘’Hungary’’, ‘’Visegrád Group’’, ‘’Hungarian democratic transition 1990s’’, ‘’Hungarian economic transition 1990s’’, ‘’Hungarian military 1990s’’, ‘’Triple Priority Foreign Policy’’, ‘’NATO accession’’, ‘’minorities in Hungary’’, ‘’Hungarian minorities’’, ‘’Hungary-Ukraine relations 1990s’’, ‘’Hungary-Slovenia relations 1990s’’, ‘’Hungary-Slovakia relations 1990s’’, ‘’Hungary-Romanian relations 1990s’’, ‘’Hungary-Croatia relations 1990s’’, and ‘’Hungary-Yugoslavia relations 1990s’’, used in various combinations. In total, thirteen academic sources were selected and analyzed with the aim of identifying Hungary’s main efforts and outcomes in relation to NATO’s accession criteria, along with supporting documents from the North Atlantic Organization archive and neighboring countries’ Embassies.

Finally, to explain NATO’s post-Cold War persistence and continued expansion, as well Hungary’s perception of its membership, this study adopts the sociological institutionalist perspective. This approach emphasizes that it is not only shared security interests but also adherence to common democratic values and norms that has enabled new

members to join and the organization to expand (Frydrych, 2008). The following definitions will also be crucial for the development of this project.

1.3.1 Defining the First Wave of NATO Enlargement after the Cold War

When defining the period analyzed in this research as ‘’the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War’’, this study adopts the definition offered by Frydrych (2008), who delineates NATO’s post-Cold War expansion process as divided into two distinct ‘’waves’’[2]:

> Since the end of the Cold War, there have been two additional waves of expansion, which embraced countries from Eastern and Central Europe that were previously members of the Warsaw Pact. Thus the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO in 1999, whereas Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined in 2004. A third post-Cold War enlargement round has been launched with the invitation of Albania and Croatia during the 2008 Bucharest Summit (Frydrych, 2008, p. 15).

Based on this formulation, the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War refers specifically to the accession of the three former Warsaw Pact members - Czechia, Hungary, and Poland - to the organization in 1999, with the official invitation having been extended two years earlier, in 1997. This definition, therefore, excludes previous and later accession rounds, such as the one that occurred in 2004. Adopting this delimitation serves two key purposes within the scope of this research. First, by being defined as the ‘’first’’ wave enlargement after the end of the Cold War, it represents a historically significant period that paved the way for the subsequent enlargement in the XIX century. Second, for the same reason, it is a period that can be revisited in the literature to find the main factors responsible for initiating the broader process of NATO’s continuity over time.

Furthermore, as briefly explained above, the specific period analyzed in this study begins in 1990 since this is the year when Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn became the first official to bring up the option of forging closer ties with NATO (Kramer, 2009, p. 42). Finally, it ends in 1997, the year the official invitation to join the Alliance was extended to Czechia, Hungary, and Poland during the Madrid Summit. Although the accession became official in 1999, the period from 1997 to 1999 is primarily characterized by procedures related

[2] Kramer also calls the admission of Czechia, Hungary, and Poland as the ‘’initial round of NATO enlargement’’ (Kramer, 2009, p. 40)

to completing the admission process, rather than debates over whether the enlargement would or should occur.

1.3.2 Central Europe and Its Definitions

An important question is what will be referred to as ‘’Central Europe’’ throughout this research - something that cannot be answered directly. As Okey (1992, p. 102) observes, Europe can be divided into Western and Eastern zones according to a variety of lines and criteria. However, the introduction of a third and central category is precisely what complicates matters. In this context, even geographers have historically failed to reach a consensus on the term. A notable example is Karl Sinnhuber’s 1954 study (apud Okey, 1992, p. 103) which demonstrated that twelve well-known British, French, and German maps of ‘’Central Europe’’ had in common only the territory of Czechoslovakia and small portions of its neighboring countries. Furthermore, Okey (1992, p. 103) notes that the definitions of sixteen prominent geographers included virtually every part of Europe within the understanding of ‘’Central Europe’’, with the sole exception of the Iberian Peninsula.

In academic literature, the definition of the region remains ambiguous. For instance, in his article *The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia*, Kramer (2009) consistently uses the term ‘’Eastern Europe’’ to refer to Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland:

> Not until February 20, 1990, nearly two weeks *after* the Gorbachev-Baker and Gorbachev-Kohl talks, did any official or unofficial observer in Eastern Europe even hesitantly bring up the option of forging closer ties with NATO and ‘’perhaps eventually being integrated into the [organization’s] political councils. These comments, by Foreign Minister Guyla Horn of Hungary, were widely seen in Hungary and elsewhere as a ploy in the campaign for Hungary’s parliamentary elections (Kramer, 2009, p. 42).

On the other hand, authors such as Goldgeier (1998), in his article *NATO expansion: The anatomy of a decision,* use both ‘’Central Europe’’ and ‘’Central and Eastern Europe’’:

> Just prior to his trip, Clinton sent Polish-born General Shalikashvili, Czech-born U.S. ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright, and Hungarian-born State Department adviser Charles Gati to Central Europe to explain the administration’s policy and to quell criticisms stemming from this region prior to the summit (Goldgeier, 1998, p. 93).

> In deciding to enlarge the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Bill

> Clinton's administration followed through on one of its most significant foreign policy initiatives [...]. The policy has involved a difficult tradeoff for the administration between wanting to ensure that political and economic reform succeeds in Central and Eastern Europe and not wanting to antagonize Russia [...] (Goldgeier, 1998, p. 85).

Nevertheless, the debate surrounding the denomination of the region also represents an assertion of historical and cultural significance, used by the Central European nations to distinguish themselves from decades of Soviet influence. This designation, as Rupnik (1990, p. 250) points out, allows these nations to see themselves as subjects, rather than merely objects of history. For the Central Europeans, as highlighted by Kurth (1997), the Soviet occupation caused them to ''cease'' to be Central Europe and become Eastern Europe instead - as if being under Soviet influence also meant being distanced from Europe itself. From this perspective, and given that one of the objectives of this research is to highlight the active participation of these countries in the first wave of NATO enlargement through the Hungarian example, the term ''Central Europe'' will be used in this study to refer to Czechia (or Czechoslovakia), Hungary, and Poland, which is consistent with the terminology adopted in the Visegrád Declaration of 1991[3].

Figure 1 - Map of the Visegrád Group

Source: DW (2018)

[3] Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration (Visegrád Group, 1991).

2 DEBATES IN LITERATURE

The academic debate surrounding NATO's expansion after the end of the Cold War is extensive, as the admission of Czechia, Hungary, and Poland marked a watershed moment in European security and ignited long-standing disputes about the rationale, process, and consequences of enlargement. In summary, scholars have explored the complex interplay between Western strategic calculations, the self-determination of Central European states, Russian perceptions of threat, and NATO's evolving institutional framework. For the purpose of this case study, the following questions - grouped in two main sections - guided this review, seeking to identify areas of convergence and divergence among scholars and assess their implications for understanding Hungary's role in the process: (1) which actor does the author identify as the most influential in the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War?; (2) what does the author say about the roles and motivations of Czechia, Poland, and particularly Hungary within this process?; and (3) what were the main criteria to join the Alliance by that time?

2.1 MAIN ACTORS AND THEIR INTERESTS

Most scholars analyzing the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War argue that the United States was the central actor driving the process. According to Goldgeier (1998), NATO's expansion represented a difficult trade-off for the U.S. administration: it sought to promote successful political and economic reform in Central Europe while avoiding unnecessary provocation of Russia. He also notes that skeptics within the U.S. government were concerned about the financial burden of enlargement and the potential impact on the Alliance's internal cohesion, especially when extending security guarantees to new members. Kydd (2001) shares the same perspective and observes that the last puzzling aspect of NATO's expansion was the strong willingness of Central European countries to join the organization.

However, Goldgeier (1998) further argues that enlargement occurred primarily because a small group of U.S. officials - most notably President Clinton and his National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake - actively supported it. He identifies Clinton's desire to project a foreign policy agenda centered on liberal values as a key motivation. In this context, although the appeals of Central European countries to ease the division established in 1945 also contributed, this factor is overlooked compared to the role of the U.S. administration. Similarly, Kydd (2001) underscores the role of domestic political dynamics within the United

States, such as the influence of electorally significant Central European immigrant communities and President Clinton's personal relationship with Czech President Václav Havel, as relevant factors shaping the enlargement process. Ultimately though, greater emphasis is placed on the importance of American domestic considerations.

Building upon this perspective, Shifrinson (2020) contends that the idea of NATO enlargement was already being discussed among senior U.S. policymakers as early as 1990 and gained momentum around 1994, largely as a result of American strategic interests. He argues that the United States sought to preserve its influence over European security and political affairs amid shifting post-Cold War dynamics. Furthermore, while he acknowledges that lobbying by Central European leaders - especially during the Clinton administration - contributed to the process, he maintains that the United States remained its primary driving force.

In the middle, a second group of scholars emphasize the role of NATO itself as an evolving institution. Adler (2008) argues that it was the Alliance's partial adoption of cooperative-security practices and its sense of community and shared purpose that enabled its transformation after the Cold War. Consequently, Central European states began to view NATO as a key institution of the Western security community and as an ‘’authoritative, trustworthy source of expertise in the area of security’’ (Adler, 2008, p. 217). Likewise, Frydrych (2008) interprets the post-Cold War accession of new members as a continuation of efforts to strengthen stability and democracy across the Euro-Atlantic area, as well as the consolidation of a community based on shared values (Frydrych, 2008, p. 36). Nonetheless, she acknowledges the decisive influence of the United States within the Alliance, noting that Washington remained the main driving force behind the enlargement process.

Finally, a third group of authors highlights the proactive role of Central European leaders. Catalano (2024, p. 67) notes that ‘’in the Summer-Autumn 1990, Havel, Wałęsa and Antall pressured the United States to accept them in NATO if they dissolved the Warsaw Pact’’. However, given concerns that NATO expansion might strain U.S.-Soviet relations, President Bush advised Havel that NATO should focus instead on establishing liaison offices with CE countries, emphasizing that the United States was not sponsoring eastern enlargement at that time. Within this framework, the author concludes that NATO expansion was not initiated by Western invitation but rather by the self-determination of Central European democracies. He nonetheless recognizes that the Clinton administration played a

key role in supporting these countries' applications.

Similarly, Rizova (2014) argues that NATO membership offered both material and symbolic advantages to CE leaders, representing a source of financial and military support. She maintains that understanding the domestic political processes of post-communist Europe is essential to explain the strong demand for NATO accession (Rizova, 2014, p. 1429) - theme further explored in this research. Within this perspective, Kramer (2009) is the one who best highlights Hungary's role in the process. Although his work focuses primarily on the debate over whether the United States did or did not promise Moscow that it would not expand the Alliance, he provides valuable evidence of Hungary's early and active engagement in moving closer to the organization:

> Not until February 20, 1990, [...] did any official or unofficial observer in Eastern Europe even hesitantly bring up the option of forging closer ties with NATO and ''perhaps eventually being integrated into the organization's political councils''. These comments, by Foreign Minister Gyula Horn of Hungary, were widely seen in Hungary and elsewhere as a ploy in the campaign for Hungary's parliamentary elections, scheduled for March 25. [...] U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger [...] downplayed the proposal as a ''revolutionary concept that was not yet worth considering'' (Kramer, 2009, p. 42).

> Not until the late spring of 1990 did any East European official raise the question of dissolving the Warsaw Pact (the newly elected Hungarian prime minister, József Antall, was the first one to do so) [...]. Moreover, even in 1991, when the East European countries' overtures to the alliance became more serious, the NATO governments tried their best to discourage East European leaders from even broaching the topic (Kramer, 2009, p. 43).

Therefore, although many scholars regard the United States as the principal actor during this wave of NATO enlargement, there is substantial evidence that the domestic and foreign policies of Central European countries - particularly Hungary, whose prime minister and foreign minister were, as Kramer (2009) notes, almost ''pioneers'' in the process - might have played a more significant role than often recognized in the literature and deserve to be further examined.

2.1.1 Hungary's Motivations to Join NATO

As the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact became increasingly likely, officials across Central Europe began to perceive a security vacuum emerging on the continent (Kramer,

2009, p. 41). Consequently, NATO enlargement started to appear as a necessary step, particularly if maintaining European security required reducing tensions between East and West (Adler, 2008, p. 208). This necessity became even more apparent after the failure of the pan-European security initiative at the Prague Conference on 12 June 1991 (Catalano, 2024, p. 66), largely due to the absence of the United States from the project (Moulin, 2022, p. 3).

Central European states then became strongly committed to NATO accession, as demonstrated by their lobbying efforts to persuade Western Europe and the United States to support their cause (Adler, 2008, p. 209). In Hungary's case, the motivations were multifaceted. First, NATO membership offered a faster path to security guarantees (Moulin, 2022, p. 3). Additionally, it was framed as both a choice of values and a commitment to shared responsibilities, representing a pathway towards socio-economic modernization (Szombati, 2007, p. 10)

Furthermore, as Kurth (1997, p. 556) notes, NATO was regarded as the ''defender of Europe'' against the Soviet Union and, since the Eastern part of the continent was under the influence of the latter, accession represented a symbolic return to the Western community. For Hungary, joining both NATO and, later, the European Union (EU) meant entering a new political and economic context and aligning with the values of these organizations, while also enhancing stability (Szombati, 2007, p. 11). Finally, Frydrych (2008) points out that the security guarantees outlined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty were a major incentive for aspiring members. For states with weak militaries located in unstable regions - as was the case of Central Europe at the time - these guarantees provided crucial reassurance regarding the protection of their territorial integrity.

2.2 ACCESSION CRITERIA

Another major theme discussed in literature that is also relevant for this study concerns the criteria for NATO accession during the 1990s. According to Goldgeier (1998), it was only in January 1994 that a group within the U.S. State Department began to discuss the need for NATO to establish clear membership - or ''associate membership'' - criteria and a timetable for accession for an initial group of candidate countries. However, given the widespread concerns that such measures might provoke a strong reaction from Russia, by October of that same year they opted to support a more gradual approach. Similar

observations are made by Frydrych (2008) and Kydd (2001).

Kydd (2001, p. 801) briefly identifies the main membership criteria as democratization, civilian control of the military, and the peaceful resolution of border and ethnic disputes with neighbors. Frydrych (2008, pp. 10-12) then further details these expectations by referring to the *Study on NATO Enlargement*, a document published by the Alliance in September 1995 to guide aspiring members in aligning with NATO standards and becoming formal candidates. According to this study, the main criteria for accession were: (1) having a market economy; (2) having a functioning democratic political system including free elections, and respect for individual liberty and the rule of law; (3) having democratic-style civil-military relations; (4) treating minorities in accordance with the OSCE guidelines; (5) resolving international and neighboring disputes peacefully; (6) giving a military contribution to the Alliance, including progress towards achieving interoperability with other members; and (7) committing to being open to further enlargement. The document also reaffirmed that the enlargement process would be conducted in accordance with Article 10[4] of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949).

Frydrych (2008) further emphasizes that NATO established several mechanisms to assist aspiring countries in meeting the criteria outlined above, most notably the Partnership for Peace[5] (1994). Within this framework, she concludes that the enlargement process was ultimately flexible and largely shaped by political assessments among member states, given that NATO's decisions require unanimous approval. Consequently, the incomplete implementation of certain reforms did not necessarily preclude an invitation to join the Alliance - an aspect that will be further explored in this research.

[4] The Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that the member states may invite any other European State to accede to the Treaty by unanimous agreement (NATO, 1949).
[5] Military cooperation program launched in January 1994 that included a vast program of practical activities with the purpose of helping countries interested in joining NATO to develop closer ties with the alliance (Adler, 2008, p. 209-210).

3 MAIN BODY

As discussed earlier, it was through Foreign Minister Gyula Horn that the possibility of closer ties between Central Europe and NATO first emerged publicly, although Kramer (2009, p. 42) further remarks that Horn was still attached to the idea of a reformed Warsaw Pact at the time. His statement was then dismissed as ‘’revolutionary’’ and portrayed as rhetoric aimed at promoting himself ahead of the Hungarian parliamentary elections, scheduled just 24 days later. Nevertheless, only a few months later, the Antall government openly called for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (Kramer, 2009, p. 43), and within six years, Hungary would become a member of NATO.

This rapid transformation raises an important question: how did Hungary move from what was initially seen as a ‘‘revolutionary’’ idea to achieving actual NATO membership? To answer this query, this study examines how Hungary addressed two of the main challenges to enlargement identified in the literature review - the concerns about the costs of expansion and its potential impact on the Alliance’s cohesion when extending security guarantees to new members - by making institutional decisions that aligned with the Alliance and the criteria outlined in the 1995 *Study*: (1) having a market economy; (2) having a functioning democratic political system with free elections, and respect for individual liberty and the rule of law; (3) having democratic-style civil-military relations; (4) treating minorities in accordance with the OSCE guidelines; (5) resolving international and neighboring disputes peacefully; (6) giving a military contribution to the Alliance, including progress towards achieving interoperability with other members; and (7) committing to being open to further enlargement.

The research will show that many of these criteria were already embedded in Hungarian domestic and foreign policy in the early 1990s, with the country’s institutional transition being largely completed by 1994 (Tökés, 1996, p. 79). Early in this term, the Antall government also introduced what became known as the *Triple-Priority Foreign Policy*, consisting of three main points that would end up by addressing the remaining requirements: (1) moral and political responsibility for Hungarian minorities beyond national borders; (2) the development of good relations with neighbouring countries; and (3) a commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration (Balogh, 1998). Although this framework was never formally codified into a single foreign policy document (Szombati, 2007, p. 5), it enjoyed broad support across Hungary’s political class and parliamentary parties (Balogh, 1998, p. 142).

Thus, this chapter will first analyze the country’s approach to criteria 1-3, which was

already well-defined at the beginning of the decade, providing essential context for Hungary's economic and political situation when the Triple Priority Foreign Policy was developed. Subsequently, the country's foreign policy will be examined in depth to understand how the foundations for meeting requirements 4-7 were laid and later refined.

3.1 DOMESTIC INITIATIVES

On the economic front, Hare (1991) notes that Hungary's transition towards a market economy began with the *New Economic Mechanism*[6] in 1968. Later, despite a period of re-centralization, further market-oriented reforms were implemented in the 1980s. While the details of these measures will not be explored here, what is important to note is that, despite significant economic and social challenges, Hungary had already made substantial progress towards a market-oriented economy by 1991, with prices, imports, and exports being almost fully liberalized. Structural changes in ownership further illustrate this transformation: in 1980, the public sector accounted for 90 percent of GDP (excluding the informal economy), while the private domestic sector represented only 10 percent and foreign ownership was nonexistent. By 1993, these shares had shifted dramatically to 42, 45, and 13 percent, respectively (Tökés, 1996, p. 87).

In the political sphere, Hungary had also achieved notable progress. The transition into a democratic system happened peacefully, and the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (abbreviated in Hungarian as MSZMP) moved away from power gradually through negotiations with the opposition (Barany, 1997, p. 22). Both the opposition and the MSZMP also reached a compromise, which included the new electoral law of 1989, responsible for scheduling new parliamentary elections for March 1990 (Racz, 1991, p. 107).

The 1990 elections were the first pluralist elections among the Visegrád states *(*Racz*,* 1991, p. 107). Six parties won seats in the Parliament: the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ), the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), and the Independent Smallholders and Citizens Party (FKGP). Notably, the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (MSZDP) and the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party

[6] The New Economic Mechanism (NEM) was the abandonment of central planning in favor of a combination of the self-regulating market mechanism and central control exercised through indirect, market-compatible fiscal and monetary instruments (Brada and Dobozi, 1991).

(MSZMP) failed to gain representation (Racz, 1991, p. 112).

The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) emerged as the winner, advocating a ‘’systemic transformation without a catastrophe’’, opposition to extremism, respect for historical traditions, and the development of a democratic political culture. In sum, the party combined populist, liberal, and Christian Democratic traditions (Racz, 1991, p. 114). Nevertheless, voter participation was low, reflecting the early stage of civil society emergence and weak ties between citizens and political parties, which were still very much underdeveloped (Racz, 1991, p. 121). Additionally, public opinion surveys at the time revealed widespread confusion and apathy among voters before and during the campaign (Racz, 1991, p. 130).

Regarding civil-military relations, the Hungarian constitution was amended in 1990 to establish that the military would be subordinated to the constitution and the president, who became the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, though this authority is not exercised in peacetime. The armed forces became accountable, in descending order, to the president, the legislature, the government, and the minister of defense, with the legislature exercising the most extensive control through its defense committee. The 1993 Defense Law further strengthened civilian control by placing the highest-ranking military officer directly under the minister of defense and more clearly defining areas of authority and accountability (Barany, 1997, p. 33).

Democratization of the armed forces had already begun in 1989, with revisions to the curricula of military colleges and high schools and increasing opportunities for officers to study at Western academies and universities. These reforms aimed to instill democratic values and professional norms, ensuring that military personnel understood their role within a democratic system (Barany, 1997, p. 35). However, even before the democratic transition, Hungary’s armed forces were already professionalized with minimal political influence, since no officers held government positions after the late 1950s (Barany, 1997, p. 23). Additionally, because the transition occurred gradually and through negotiations rather than conflict, there was no need for military intervention (Barany, 1997, p. 22). Finally, the transition was welcomed by the majority of officers partly due to the stigma associated with the Communist regime (Barany, 1997, p. 34).

Within this framework, in June 1997, the U.S. Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs outlined that Hungary was a functioning and stable democracy that had gone through

two complete democratic changes of government, had established effective civilian control over the military, and was very much aligned with Western values. On the economic side, the document highlights that the country's stabilization measures had been successful and further notes its admission to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in May 1996 as a positive matter.

3.2 THE TRIPLE PRIORITY FOREIGN POLICY

3.2.1 Minorities

The minority question became a central element of Hungary's foreign policy even before the democratic transition was complete. At the Warsaw Pact Foreign Ministers' meeting held in Warsaw on October 26-27, 1989, Foreign Minister Gyula Horn emphasized the growing importance of protecting ethnic and national minorities. In the same context, he argued that aligning domestic legislation with international norms was becoming increasingly common and that the international community had both the right and the responsibility to monitor states' adherence to human rights and humanitarian commitments (Byrne; Mastny, 2005, p. 657).

The historical background is important to explain the prominence of the minority question in Hungary's foreign policy. By the 1990s, Hungarians constituted the second-largest ethnic group in Europe living outside their nation-state. While economic migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to their dispersion, the decisive factor was the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which reduced Hungary's territory to 29 percent of its pre-war size and left 38 percent of its population outside the new borders - half of it constituted of ethnic Hungarians. Later, during the communist period, the government maintained a strict policy of non-involvement towards the diaspora, but this began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s as domestic interest in Hungarian traditions grew alongside increasing demands from Hungarian minorities abroad, particularly in Romania (Butler, 2007, p. 1119).

Figure 4 - Hungary's territory before and after the Treaty of Trianon

Source: Financial Times (2020)

In the early 1990s, the minority question was officially incorporated into the Triple-Priority Foreign Policy of the Antall government. However, although the policy aimed to balance its three pillars, the minority one often overshadowed the others due to governmental preferences and pressure from organizations representing ethnic Hungarians abroad. Moreover, while the policy sought to support minorities in line with international law, its methods were never clearly defined. Prime Minister József Antall's demand for full political autonomy and co-nation status for Hungarian minorities - and his declaration that he was the ‘’prime minister of 15 million Hungarians’’, explicitly including those abroad - symbolized the tension between protecting minorities and respecting the sovereignty of neighbouring countries. Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky even alluded to the possibility of border changes - a remark that drew strong criticism from neighboring states (Butler, 2007, pp. 1120-1121).

The policy later also faced domestic criticism from Gyula Horn's coalition government (1994-1998), which argued that giving excessive influence to organizations representing Hungarian minorities abroad could jeopardize Hungary's European integration prospects, especially as NATO increasingly urged Central European countries to resolve minority-related disputes peacefully. Consequently, his government restricted state support for ethnic Hungarians abroad to promote cultural autonomy and cooperation through cultural associations. In addition, his administration concluded key bilateral agreements formally acknowledging existing borders and renouncing any territorial ambitions with neighbors, like Slovakia (1995) and Romania (1996) (Butler, 2007).

This shift eased regional tensions and strengthened Hungary's international credibility, facilitating its alignment with NATO's political and security framework. Overall, the policy produced positive results throughout the decade, although the dynamics and challenges differed across each of Hungary's neighboring countries.

In Romania, the Hungarian population in the early 1990s ranged between 1.6 and 2 million, representing approximately 7 percent of the population. Most lived in Transylvania, especially in Harghita and Covasna counties, where they accounted for 84.6 and 75.2 percent of the population, respectively. In December 1989, Hungarians in Cluj-Napoca established the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR), which paved the way for similar organizations, despite the Romanian Constitution defining the country as a ‘’unitary state’’ (Edwards, 1997, 355-356). Early tensions culminated in violent clashes in Târgu-Mureş, on March 20, 1990, leaving three dead and 269 injured (MureȘan, 2019, p. 169). After that, both countries worked to ease tensions, and the situation improved with the 1996 *Treaty of Understanding, Cooperation and Good Neighborliness* signed between them. Later that year, the DAHR joined Romania's governing coalition, marking an important step towards political participation and improved minority rights (Edwards, 1997)

In Slovakia, the 1991 census recorded roughly 560,000 ethnic Hungarians, mostly along the Southern border. The 1992 Slovak Constitution guaranteed minority rights, but the 1995 Language Law reversed much of this progress by requiring all public communications to be conducted in Slovak. Additionally, the removal of Hungarian-language signs had already begun in 1993, and restrictions were imposed on minority-language education and media. The tensions further escalated when Slovakia's 1996 administrative reform redrew county borders in a way that diluted the Hungarian majority in certain areas. Nevertheless, diplomatic engagement prevailed, and on March 26, 1996, both countries ratified the *Treaty on Good-Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation,* recognizing existing borders and granting extensive protections to the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (Edwards, 1997).

In Ukraine's Transcarpathian region, home to around 155,000 Hungarians (12.7 percent of the local population according to the 1989 Soviet census), minority rights evolved positively. In 1989, Hungarians established the Hungarian Cultural Association of Subcarpathia (HCAS), which promoted linguistic and cultural preservation. Then, as early as in December 1991, the two countries signed a bilateral treaty renouncing all territorial claims against each other, which significantly improved the situation of the Hungarian minority in

the region (Edwards, 1997, pp. 363-364).

The Hungarian minority in the former Yugoslavia numbered around 370,000 in 1991 - with 339,491 in Vojvodina, 22,355 in Croatia, and 8,503 in Slovenia - and faced significant hardship during the wars of the 1990s (Edwards, 1997, p. 364). The autonomous status of the Vojvodina region was removed after Milosevic came to power in 1989, which reduced the level of participation ethnic-Hungarians had in the local government. After the outbreak of the civil war, it is estimated that between 250,000 and 300,000 ethnic-Serb refugees moved to the region, which also increased the tensions. In this context, the Hungarian press and government worked in monitoring the situation and preventing any conflict escalations (Butler, 2007, p. 1123).

Croatia saw the largest decline in the Hungarian population living inside its borders. However, the Democratic Community of Hungarians in Croatia expressed hope that many would return later (Edwards, 1997, p. 365). Additionally, the *Agreement between the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Hungary on the protection of the Croatian minority in the Republic of Hungary and of the Hungarian minority in the Republic of Croatia* was signed in April, 1995 (Bencze, 2014, p. 143). On the other side, relations with Slovenia were more positive, and both countries signed an agreement in 1992 that guaranteed educational and cultural rights for each other's minorities. The treaty allowed the use of minority languages in public administration and courts, and promoted cross-border cooperation to protect minority interests (Edwards, 1997, pp. 365-366)**.**

Domestically, Hungary also took steps to institutionalize minority rights in line with Western democratic standards. By 1997, thirteen national and ethnic minorities were officially recognized: Armenians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Germans, Greeks, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Ruthenians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Ukrainians (Edwards, 1997, p. 348). The Roma, who made up between five and eight percent of the country's population, remained the most disadvantaged group, particularly concentrated in the poorer eastern regions of Hungary (Göncz; Geskó, 1997, p. 32). In contrast, the other twelve national minorities had comparable levels of education and participation in Hungary's economic life to that of the Hungarian majority (Edwards, 1997, p. 348). Nevertheless, the main tensions between the Hungarians and the Roma community generally occurred at the local level and were largely rooted in lifestyle differences (Göncz; Geskó, 1997, p. 32).

The improvements began in 1993, when the Hungarian Parliament passed Act

LXXVII on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities, and Hungary became the first former communist country to enact such a progressive minority law (Göncz; Geskó, 1997, p. 33). The act guaranteed that no policy would aim at forced assimilation and granted both individual and collective rights, including local and national self-governments. By 1995, twelve minorities had established 792 local minority self-governments. The law also allowed minorities to display their symbols, celebrate national holidays, and maintain contact with their kin states (Edwards, 1997, p. 349) - rights that mirrored Hungary's expectations for the treatment of ethnic Hungarians abroad.

In conclusion, Hungary's management of domestic and foreign minority issues throughout the 1990s became a central pillar of its bid for Euro-Atlantic integration. By seeking to resolve disputes through treaties and domestic reforms, Hungary demonstrated a commitment to peaceful conflict resolution that contrasted sharply with the concerns raised in the letter received by President Clinton in June 1997. In that letter fifty former U.S. senators, cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, and foreign policy specialists warned that NATO expansion was an error, as it would require the United States to extend security guarantees to countries with unresolved border and minority disputes (McGwire, 1998, pp. 23-24).

Furthermore, as Butler (2007, p. 1118) notes, Hungary was among the first Central European states to adopt a comprehensive, multi-sector approach to national security. The Hungarian Ministry of Defence explicitly stated that national security should encompass not only military defense but also ‘’politics, economics, human and minority rights, and cultural and ecological factors’’. This broad understanding of security aligned closely with NATO's post-Cold War vision and helped establish Hungary's credibility as a reliable partner. As Balogh (1998, p. 148) observes, a state could not be deemed ready for Euro-Atlantic organizations if it had contested borders or unresolved minority issues - challenges that Hungary worked to address, even if not perfectly.

3.2.2 Good Relations with Neighbours

Although Hungary's approach to the minority question already addressed points 4 and 5 of NATO's admission criteria, further observations can be made regarding its broader efforts to maintain good relations with neighboring states. Throughout the 1990s, this objective was particularly significant for Hungary's bid to join Euro-Atlantic organizations - particularly given its landlocked position and proximity to seven states with diverse economies, political systems, and sizes (Balogh, 1998, p. 147). In this context, Hungary concluded important

bilateral treaties with Ukraine (1991), Croatia (1992), Slovenia (1993), Slovakia (1995), and Romania (1996). Since there were no outstanding issues with Austria, a similar agreement was deemed unnecessary. In contrast, while such a treaty with Yugoslavia would have been desirable, the ongoing war and its consequences rendered this impossible (Balogh, 1998, p. 143).

Hungary's efforts to establish good relations with Ukraine began in late 1989, when a Ukrainian delegation led by Y. Olenenko, the Minister of Culture of the Ukrainian SSR, visited Hungary, and both countries signed a *Protocol on Cooperation in the Sphere of Culture*. According to the Embassy of Ukraine in Hungary, the Hungarian government consistently sought to support Ukraine's sovereignty. Subsequently, in May–June 1991, the Chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament, Leonid Kravchuk, visited Hungary, and nine bilateral documents were signed between the two countries, including the *Declaration on the Principles of Cooperation Concerning the Security of National Minority Rights* and the *Declaration on Relations between Ukraine and the Republic of Hungary*, which explicitly stated that both parties did not and would not have any territorial claims against each other (Embassy of Ukraine in Hungary, 2012).

Around the same time, the Embassy of Hungary began operating in Kyiv, becoming one of the first foreign diplomatic missions established in the Ukrainian capital. On March 24, 1992, the Embassy of Ukraine in Hungary was inaugurated—marking the country's first diplomatic mission abroad. Furthermore, in February 1993, Ukrainian President L. Kravchuk traveled to Hungary, where new agreements were signed covering economic, scientific, technical, and industrial cooperation. Additional accords were concluded on simplifying border checkpoints for residents of regions located near the frontier (Embassy of Ukraine in Hungary, 2012).

Hungary officially recognized Croatia's independence on 15 January 1992, and three days later the Consulate General in Zagreb was elevated to the status of the Embassy of the Republic of Hungary. Then, in December of the same year, both countries signed the *Agreement on friendly relations and cooperation between the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Hungary,* which became the foundation of their bilateral relations. This was followed in 1994 by the *Agreement on Cultural, Educational, and Scientific Cooperation* and in 1995 by the *Agreement on the Protection of the Croatian minority in the Republic of Hungary and of the Hungarian minority in the Republic of Croatia* (Bencze, 2014, p. 143).

In the case of Slovenia, relations were good and the two states signed the *Agreement on Cooperation in the Fields of Culture, Education, and Science* in 1992. Moreover, in the same year, the *Convention on providing special rights for the Slovenian minority living in the Republic of Hungary and for the Hungarian minority living in the Republic of Slovenia* was also signed (Culture.Sl, 2025).

Relations with Romania were more complex. As outlined by Butler (2007, p. 1122), the early 1990s marked a period of rising nationalism in Romania, which intensified tensions surrounding the ethnic-Hungarian minority in Transylvania. Consequently, bilateral relations between the two countries were effectively frozen until 1994. Anti-Hungarian rhetoric was widespread in Romanian political discourse and Hungary even attempted to block Romania's accession to the Council of Europe in 1993. However, in order to comply with NATO's values, both countries needed to conclude a treaty of mutual understanding. The *Treaty of understanding, cooperation and good neighborliness* was then signed in 1996, reaffirming mutual respect for the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of both states. After that, the US ambassadors in Bucharest and Budapest - Alfred H. Moses and Donald M. Blinken - published an article in the *Washington Post* entitled *Beyond Bosnia,* that was later adopted by the US Congress, arguing that this treaty as as significant for Central Europe as the Franco-British reconciliation that happened earlier in the century (Mureşan, 2019).

With Slovakia, bilateral relations were formalized through the *1995 Treaty on Good-Nighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation*. In addition to addressing minority protection, Article 12 regulated cooperation in the fields of culture and education, thus establishing a framework for mutual understanding and jointly agreed standards of minority protection. Although implementation did not proceed without tensions, progress was made: several new border crossings were opened, regional cross-border economic cooperation improved, and both sides inaugurated cultural institutions - the Slovak Cultural Centre in Northern Hungary and the Hungarian Institute in Bratislava - jointly funded by the two governments (Wolff, 2001, pp. 180-182).

Lastly, it is also important to mention Hungary's participation in the Visegrád Group, established to coordinate its Euro-Atlantic aspirations alongside Czechoslovakia and Poland (Catalano, 2024, p. 67). The cooperation was formally established in February 1991, in Visegrád, Hungary, through a document signed by József Antall, Lech Wałęsa, and Václav Havel (Vondra, 2011). Thereafter, on 6 May 1992, in Prague, the three leaders jointly declared

that their objective was to achieve full NATO membership (Catalano, 2024, p. 68).

In conclusion, by the time Hungary received its invitation to join NATO in 1997, none of its borders were in dispute with any neighboring state. Bilateral relations with Austria remained excellent and required no formal treaty. With the other neighbors, Hungary had concluded comprehensive agreements on understanding, cooperation, and good relations. Altogether, these developments demonstrated Hungary's commitment to peaceful regional relations, mutual respect, and adherence to international norms - all of which directly reinforced its credibility as a responsible and reliable partner within the NATO framework.

3.2.3 Integration with Euro-Atlantic Institutions

The starting point for Hungary's concrete efforts towards Euro-Atlantic integration can be traced to Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn call out on February 20, 1990 (Kramer 2009, p. 42). This episode is also cited by Shifrinson (2020, p. 823) to indicate the moment when Central European officials first urged the United States to consider NATO's eastward expansion. From this point onward, Hungary became increasingly active in seeking to align itself with Western values. However, for the purpose of this research, this section focuses specifically on Hungary's path towards NATO membership, without delving into the parallel process of European Union accession - although it is important to note that both efforts were mutually reinforcing.

Kydd (2001, p. 805) brings up Schimmelfenning's argument that NATO is ''best understood as an organization of an international community of values and norms''. Within this framework, as analyzed in the sections above, Hungary had made significant progress in democratization, establishing a liberal economy, and resolving post-Cold War frictions peacefully, particularly with Romania. These achievements reflected the political, normative, and cultural dimensions of Euro-Atlantic integration, aligning with Schimmelfenning's definition of the Alliance. Thus, the next step concerns the military sphere.

In considering NATO enlargement, the Allies evaluated not only the prospective member's military capacities, but also their readiness to fulfill its commitments. Another key aspect was their participation in international operations (Frydrych, 2008). NATO's London Summit of July 1990, through its *Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance*, initiated the opening of regular diplomatic liaison with Central Europe and declared that ''the Atlantic Community must reach out to the countries of the East which were our adversaries in

the Cold War, and extend to them the hand of friendship'' (NATO, 1990). Despite this, an internal US State Department analysis from October 1990 concluded that granting full NATO membership and security guarantees to Central European states was not in the immediate interest of the Alliance or the United States (Catalano, 2024, p. 67). Consequently, liaison missions remained the preferred approach through early 1991 (Shifrinson, 2024, p. 826).

Nevertheless, in June 1991, the Yugoslav crisis erupted, adding a new dimension to the regional security landscape. Hungary's participation in the conflict as a partner of NATO will be analyzed as the country's main move towards military integration with the organization. Things became more positive before this during the Rome Summit of November 1991, when the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was announced as the first attempt to institutionalize the partnership between the East and the West in security-related areas such as defense planning or civilian-military relations (Adler, 2008, p. 209). By mid-1992, nearly all former Soviet republics - except Georgia - had joined the NACC, which frustrated the Visegrád countries that aspired a faster path to membership (Catalano, 2024, p. 68). More specifically, besides the Visegrád countries, the Rome Declaration also invited Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and the Soviet Union to be part of this new era of partnership and participate, for example, in annual meetings with the North Atlantic Council at Ministerial level (NATO, 1991).

Later on, at the June 1993 meeting of the North Atlantic Council, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher declared that NATO enlargement was ''not on the agenda''. Yet, in September of that year, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake delivered a major policy speech advocating for the expansion of NATO to include ''the world's free community of market democracies. Nevertheless, resistance within the US bureaucracy remained strong, largely due to concerns that expansion might complicate alliance management and antagonize Russia - especially amid political turmoil in Moscow, where President Yeltsin's troops had fired on the Parliament that same October (Goldgeier, 1998, pp. 87-88)

Under these circumstances, while some American officials argued that offering NATO membership could incentivize reform in the Visegrád countries, opponents of the rapid enlargement prevailed. The compromise was the creation of the Partnership for Peace (PfP), officially launched at the Brussels Summit in January 1994 (Goldgeier, 1998). This initiative sought to enhance stability and cooperation across the Euro-Atlantic area through practical measures such as promoting transparency in defense planning, ensuring democratic control of

armed forces, improving readiness for UN- or CSCE-led operations and developing cooperative military relations with NATO forces. Each partner established a liaison office at NATO headquarters, and a Partnership Coordination Cell was created at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) to manage peacekeeping cooperation. The PfP thus aimed not only to transfer technical knowledge but also to familiarize partner countries with NATO's operational standards (Adler, 2008, p. 210).

By this time, within its interests to join NATO, Hungary had two other major priorities: improving its relations with Romania and Slovakia, and safeguarding itself from the instability caused by the Yugoslav conflict. When the Dayton Peace Conference began in November 1995, Hungary had already announced its willingness to grant NATO access to its airfields, military facilities, and logistical infrastructure in support of the upcoming Implementation Force (IFOR) mission in Bosnia (Blinken, 2007, pp. 110-112). Moreover, Hungary had already participated in seven joint Peacekeeping exercises scheduled for that same year (NATO, 1995).

For the United States, the IFOR represented the largest deployment of US troops in Europe since World War II in order for them to help enforce the peace agreement. This required a nearby staging area outside of the conflict zone, and Hungary's location made it the ideal site for such an operation. Consequently, on November 10, 1995, a US-led delegation arrived in Budapest to negotiate the establishment of an IFOR logistical base in the country and the use of Hungarian airspace, rails, roads, and river routes. In this setting, Hungarian officials emphasized that their support for the mission was not only a contribution to regional stability, but also a demonstration of their commitment to NATO's objectives and their membership aspiration (Blinken, 2007, pp. 112-114). The Hungarian government welcomed the proposal and invited American troops under NATO command to establish a base at a former Taszár airfield - remarkably, only four years after the country had ensured the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory (Blinken, 2007, p. 109). This cooperation marked a decisive step in Hungary's military alignment with NATO and underscored its growing role as a reliable regional partner in Euro-Atlantic security operations.

As a result, by 1996, the military conditions for Hungary's admission into NATO were in place. Subsequent meetings between Clinton and Yeltsin, including the one in Helsinki in March 1997, reaffirmed the inevitability of NATO expansion. Despite Yeltsin's opposition, he

was compelled to accept the process, leading to the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act at the Paris Summit in May 1997, which stipulated that no nuclear weapons would be deployed or stored on the territory of new members - a gesture aimed at fostering mutual trust (Catalano, 2024, pp. 69-70). Ultimately, the three Visegrád countries - Czechia, Hungary and Poland - were invited to join NATO at the Madrid Summit of July 8-9 1997, marking the culmination of nearly a decade of political, military, and diplomatic efforts to integrate Central Europe into the Euro-Atlantic community. Four months later, in a referendum held on November 16, 1997, 85 percent of Hungarian voters expressed their support for Hungary's accession to the Alliance.

> Today, we invite the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to begin accession talks with NATO. Our goal is to sign the Protocol of Accession at the time of the Ministerial meetings in December 1997 and to see the ratification process completed in time for membership to become effective by the 50th anniversary of the Washington Treaty in April 1999. (NATO, 1997).

Lastly, the Alliance noted in a Final Communiqué on December 2, 1997 that the military capabilities of the newly invited members were not a concern:

> We noted that the invitees plan to increase significantly their defence spending and to contribute appropriately to the Alliance's commonly-funded budgets. The report concludes that the available and planned military forces and their capabilities of the current Allies and the three invitees are sufficient to ensure fully the collective defence of all members of the enlarged Alliance in the present and foreseeable security environment and that the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland will also make valuable contributions to the Alliance's ability to perform the full range of its missions (NATO, 1997).

4 CONCLUSION

This case study aimed to trace the steps taken by Hungary towards its NATO accession in order to demonstrate that the Central European countries played a more active and significant role in the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War than is often portrayed in the literature. In this context, the analysis showed that Hungary's accession was not merely a passive consequence of Western strategic interests, but also the result of deliberate political choices intended to bring the country closer to Western values. By examining both Hungarian domestic and foreign policy between 1990 and 1997, this thesis demonstrated that Hungary worked to meet the criteria outlined in the *Study of NATO enlargement* (1995) - a process that had, in fact, begun even before the document's publication.

Domestically, Hungary advanced from a partially liberalized socialist economy to making substantial progress towards a market-oriented economy (Hare, 1991). Politically, the country underwent a peaceful democratic transition and held the first pluralist elections among the Visegrád states after the end of the Cold War *(*Racz*,* 1991). During its transition, Hungary also amended its Constitution and adopted a new Defense Law to ensure the democratization of its armed forces, put under the authority of the Constitution itself and the president (Barany, 1997).

In the realm of foreign policy, through the Triple Priority Foreign Policy, Hungary sought to address the remaining criteria for NATO membership by fostering good relations with its neighbors and resolving minority and border disputes whenever possible. Although the initial emphasis on the minority question generated diplomatic tensions, the subsequent Horn government recalibrated this approach and aligned it more closely with the norms of European cooperation (Butler, 2007). By the mid-1990s, Hungary had normalized relations with its neighbors through a series of bilateral treaties with Ukraine (1991), Croatia (1992), Slovenia (1992), Slovakia (1995), and Romania (1996). These agreements recognized existing borders, established frameworks for minority protection, and reflected Hungary's willingness to resolve disputes through negotiation rather than confrontation. Finally, the country's efforts to get closer to the Alliance were exemplified by its participation in joint military exercises and, particularly, its support for the IFOR mission in Bosnia in 1995.

However, the process did not unfold without challenges. As noted by the U.S. Bureau

of European and Canadian Affairs in June 1997 - just days before the Madrid Declaration - Hungary still had the highest per capita foreign debt in Central Europe and had a limited budget for achieving NATO interoperability. Moreover, as discussed earlier, a bilateral treatment with Yugoslavia was never reached during the 1990s, leaving Hungary technically bordering what was considered an ‘’unstable’’ neighbor, while the resolution of minority issues with Romania was marked by violent episodes. Nevertheless, as Frydrych (2008) observes, it was the adherence to common democratic values and norms that enabled new members to join NATO. In this sense, the enlargement process was largely shaped by political assessments, and failure to perfectly fulfill all the criteria did not preclude an invitation to join the Alliance.

Ultimately, Hungary’s invitation to access NATO in 1999 represented the culmination of nearly a decade of comprehensive transformations. By the time of the 1997 referendum - where over 85 percent of voters endorsed membership - Hungary had consolidated both an international credibility and consensus that were sufficient for integration. Its accession, alongside that of Poland and Czechia, marked not only the first wave of NATO enlargement after the Cold War, but also a symbolic reintegration of Central Europe into the Western security community.

In this regard, Hungary’s case highlights the interplay between domestic reform and foreign policy strategies in the pursuit of NATO membership. The country’s proactive diplomacy, emphasis on regional cooperation, and commitment to Western norms demonstrate that NATO enlargement was shaped as much by the agency of aspiring members as by the strategic calculations of existing ones, or the Alliance itself. In this sense, Hungary’s experience challenges the notion of enlargement as a purely U.S.-driven process and underscores the significance of initiatives of aspiring candidates in reshaping the security landscape of the Alliance.

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