



RAD Background Report/130  
(Eastern Europe)  
27 July 1989

THE ROMANIAN MILITARY THREAT TO HUNGARY

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Summary: As relations between Hungary and Romania worsen, Hungarian officials continue to refer to what they claim are instances of Romanian military threats. There is no evidence of specific threats, nor any reason to expect a real conflict.

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Perhaps in reaction to the failure of the talks between Hungary and Romania on July 8 in Bucharest, Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn has added his voice to those who raise the specter of a possible Romanian military--and even nuclear--threat to Hungary. The two nominal Warsaw Pact allies are locked in bitter dispute over the Romanian government's mistreatment of its ethnic Hungarian minority and Romanian charges that Hungary has irredentist claims on Romanian territory. More important, perhaps, the Romanian side has lately begun to equate Hungarian territorial "revisionism" with ideological "revisionism," in its quest to win popular support for the Ceausescu regime's opposition to reform.

At a news conference in Budapest on July 10 Horn cited three specific instances of alleged Romanian military threats.<sup>1</sup> He claimed that high-ranking Romanian officials had announced that Romania was capable of making nuclear weapons; had said that Romania would soon make medium-range missiles; and had threatened Hungary's territorial security. The Hungarian news agency's account of this conference quoted Horn as saying that Hungary did not wish to "dramatize" such Romanian statements but neither did it wish to let them pass without comment "in a situation where relations between the two countries are tense."<sup>2</sup>

Romanian Nuclear Weapons? This is not the first time that a Hungarian official has shown public concern about Romania's

alleged capability to produce nuclear weapons. In November 1988 the Chairman of the Hungarian National Assembly and former Central Committee Secretary Matyas Szoros asserted that Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu had bragged during his meeting with Karel Gross in Arad in August 1988 about his country's ability to "produce or manufacture everything, even nuclear devices."<sup>8</sup>

In April 1989 Ceausescu told the Romanian Communist Party's Central Committee that Romania had the "technological capacity" to produce nuclear weapons but had chosen not to go ahead in this field because "we are firmly opposed to nuclear weapons." Yet Ceausescu suggested that every state had the right to a military deterrent of its own, and this philosophy coupled with his eagerness to tout Romania's technical prowess seems to have been enough to alarm Budapest.

While Western observers do not argue with Ceausescu's assessment of Romanian technology, they note that far more than trained scientists are necessary to build an atomic bomb. No one--except perhaps in Hungary--seriously believes that Romania has the political, military, or economic incentive to join the club of states with nuclear weapons.

A Romanian Missile? Horn's concern about a missile threat possibly stems from an article in the 8 May 1989 edition of *Der Spiegel* in which the West German magazine alleged that a plant to produce medium-range nuclear missiles was under construction in Romania, using blueprints provided by a West German company. No government or private agency has confirmed this allegation, and the Hungarian media also reacted to the story with skepticism.<sup>9</sup> Horn did say that a "high-level" Romanian official had announced that Romania would soon make medium-range missiles.<sup>9</sup> No such public statement is known, but the Hungarians might have been told this during their meetings with Romanian officials during the Warsaw Pact summit in early July in Bucharest.

There has been some speculation that Ceausescu might be interested in developing medium-range nuclear missiles, but not for Romanian use. The arms trade, especially to Third World countries, has been an important money-maker for economically hard-pressed Romania.<sup>7</sup> A medium-range ballistic missile would be a big seller.

Even if the story in *Der Spiegel* were true--and Romania intended to use such a missile against its neighbor--the threat to Hungary would be some years off. What Horn did not mention was that Romania today fields around 20 Soviet-built Soud-B missiles. With a range of up to 300 kilometers, these missiles could cover all of Hungary except for a thin strip along its western border. While the Soviet Union has nuclear warheads for this missile, Romania does not. The Romanians would have to be content with high-explosive warheads, although it is possible that they could--like the Soviets--also be able to load these

weapons with poisonous gas. Hungary, too, has Soviet-B missiles, although fewer than Romania, so this highly theoretical missile threat is a mutual one.

A Party-Back Historian Rather Than Army Chief of Staff. Horn reported that the Romanian Army Chief of Staff had made an implicit threat to Hungary's territorial security. According to Horn, this officer had said that the Trianon Treaty of 1920 was unjust because it allowed Hungary to keep regions populated by ethnic Romanians. Horn alleged that the Romanian military leader had also demanded that this situation be changed. The Trianon Treaty was one of the series of Versailles Treaties that followed the First World War. Ironically, it also turned over to Romania the region of Transylvania, which has a substantial Hungarian ethnic minority, as well as depriving Hungary of territories that were transferred to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

When Radio Free Europe asked officials in Budapest for more details about the Chief of Staff's alleged statement, it was referred to a 1968 issue of a military publication that the Hungarians were unable to identify. This turned out to be the Romanian military-historical quarterly *Lupta Intregului Popor* [The Struggle of the Whole People]. It contained an article by a party-back historian, Ion Ardeleanu, who quoted a book written in 1944 by a long-deceased American journalist with Romanian ties, Milton Lehrer. Lehrer wrote--and Ardeleanu quoted--the following about the Trianon Treaty:

if in the year 1920 an injustice has been committed, it is not the Hungarians who should be complaining but the Romanians, far beyond the political border [then established], several Romanian islands were left on Hungary's territory.<sup>2</sup>

The editorial board of *Lupta Intregului Popor* is headed by Lieutenant General Ilie Ceausescu, the President's brother. Ilie Ceausescu is also a Deputy Minister of Defense, not quite the Army Chief of Staff mentioned by Horn, but close. He has been energetic, and offensive, in combating Hungary's so-called territorial and ideological "revisionism."<sup>3</sup> Ardeleanu's article nowhere, however, questioned the finality of the Trianon Treaty, as Horn claimed when discussing the remarks attributed to the Romanian Chief of Staff.

A New Hungarian Defense Doctrine? Horn's reference to these alleged Romanian threats came less than a month after the controversial interviews given to the Italian newspaper *Le Stamps* by the Hungarian reformist leader Imre Pozsgay and the deputy head of the department for party relations of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, Csaba Tabajdi. Like Horn, Tabajdi noted that Romania claimed it could produce nuclear weapons; and he also referred to the eventual possibility of a Romanian medium-range missile. He said that Hungary was developing its own national security doctrine

... in accordance with new assessments of potential dangers. Today the great majority of Hungarians know that an attack would not come from the west but from the southwest, however remote that hypothesis may be.

Forcay confirmed that Hungary would, in the future, deploy its military forces in accordance with its own assessment of external threats rather than solely in the interests of the Warsaw Pact (that is, the Soviet Union). He suggested that troops would be shifted from the frontier with Austria and moved toward the frontier with Romania.

As a result of his interview with La Stampa, Tabaçdi, who had also made highly critical statements about Karoly Gross, was suspended from his party position by the latter on June 23; important party officials subsequently came to his defense, however. His immediate superior in the Central Committee apparatus, Geza Kotai, told Radio Budapest on 28 June that Tabaçdi had not invented anything new. Matyas Szauro told the government daily Magyar Hirlap that it was true that "there is an element in Romania's policy that we have to pay attention to." In Szauro's view, Tabaçdi had made a "tactical error" in talking about such matters while he was abroad.<sup>11</sup> Tabaçdi will now face an inquiry on July 2; he is back at work but without authority to make decisions.

Despite the various statements of concern about a potential military threat from Romania, Hungary does not seem to be taking any of the concrete steps one might expect from a country in any sort of peril from its neighbor. Quite the opposite has been the case: Hungary is going ahead with its long-announced unilateral military cuts. At a press conference on July 7 in Budapest, a Defense Ministry spokesman said that the first step in this process would be the "liquidation" in August 1983 of a division stationed in eastern Hungary (in other words, closer to Romania than to Austria).<sup>12</sup> In the same television interview in which he mentioned "certain military threats in recent months" from Romania, Horn said that he expected Hungary to be able to reduce its armed forces much more as a result of the current conventional arms talks in Vienna.<sup>13</sup>

At least in public, Hungary's military leaders are denying any military threat from Romania. In late May Major General Egon Szabo, the spokesman of the Defense Ministry, said in a press interview that while the Hungarian military was "worried" about what was happening in Romania, "the traditional friendship-of-arms between the two armies has remained." The ministry knew of no Romanian threat, he said, and the Warsaw Pact would prevent any situation that would endanger peace between Hungary and Romania.<sup>14</sup> In a more recent radio interview, Minister of Defense Ferenc Karpati said that the rumor that Soviet troops being withdrawn from western Hungary were being moved near the Romanian border in case there should be an "incident" with Romania was "scare-news" that had no

foundation whatsoever. He went on to say that a military conflict between two Warsaw Pact members had to be totally excluded.<sup>11</sup>

Possible Hungarian Motives. None of the three threats enumerated by Horn is very convincing. Cries of "wolf" might, however, have been expected from Hungarian military leaders whose armed forces are facing a very bleak future. Already the smallest in the Warsaw Pact, the Hungarian military has been told that further, severe belt-tightening is inevitable. Hardly a month goes by without the announcement of another cut in defense spending. Early in July 1989 a senior Hungarian Army officer said that the Hungarian military could no longer meet its Warsaw Pact requirements. He complained that almost all defense investments had been stopped, that no new airplanes had been purchased, and that tanks that should have been replaced 10 years ago were still being used because there was no money available for new ones.<sup>12</sup> Other observers have said that the Hungarian armed forces would need to be cut by 30-40% if they wanted to establish a sound relationship between procurement and operations.<sup>13</sup> In January 1989 Hungary announced plans for an 8.8% reduction in its armed forces over the next two years; as mentioned above, it has just reaffirmed this measure.

As grim as this picture might be for the Hungarian military, they still do not have much to fear from Romania. Although Romania is the only Warsaw Pact country not to have announced any cuts in its armed forces following Mikhail Gorbachev's speech to the United Nations in November 1988, it simply does not have a credible army. One Western expert described Romanian armed forces as "insignificant" for the following reason: the army "is regularly employed as a massive source of cheap labour. Many conscripts do not experience anything more than the most rudimentary training. . . ."<sup>14</sup> He said that Ceausescu's defense doctrine had resulted in the complete deprofessionalization of the armed forces. It was based on a territorial defense that called for the entire population to fight, thus negating the need for well-trained, professional soldiers.

It is not Hungary's military leaders who are expressing concern, however, but rather its political leaders--and reformist leaders at that. What could be the political motive behind these repeated Hungarian alarms? Ceausescu has set himself up as the defender of orthodoxy in a communist system that is trembling with change. He and his brother have orchestrated a virulent and offensive campaign against Hungary that has not shied away from other implicit threats. An example is the recent telegram sent to Ceausescu by a Romanian veterans organization protesting the reburial of former Hungarian Prime Minister Imre Nagy on June 16. Claiming that 42,000 Romanian soldiers had died in the liberation of Hungary during the Second World War, the veterans declared: "Then, we took up arms against injustice in the name of reason; now, also in the name of

reason, we speak up against the anti-communist, anti-Romanian, and fascist plots in Hungary."<sup>1</sup> True, it was only old soldiers speaking up this time; but the text has the fervor of a call to arms. Furthermore, an anti-Hungarian campaign underway in Romania seems to be targeted mainly on the military. For example, no less than two-thirds of the May 1988 issue of the military monthly *Viets Militars* dealt with various aspects of the dispute with Hungary.<sup>2</sup>

Those defending the recent Hungarian treatment of this hypothetical Romanian military threat might rightly point out that each speaker has stressed that the seriousness of the matter should not be exaggerated. However, the frequency with which Hungarian leaders have touched on this issue of late, even if only in passing, and especially the questionable pertinence and even accuracy of some of their examples have accomplished just that. Such as "of course. . . but then. . ." approach was evident in a recent Radio Free Europe discussion with Surocs.<sup>3</sup> The Chairman of the National Assembly said that he did not believe that the conflict with Romania could escalate into a real military clash, but he then said that Hungary "must pay attention" to "some signals, some manifestations in Romania. . . ." He reminded the interviewer that Romanian troops had twice been to Budapest in this century, whereas Hungarian troops had never been in Bucharest, adding that "when corpses float on. . . rivers at the two countries' borders, people begin to be scared." Surocs also mentioned alleged Western news reports that Romania had reinforced its troops along the border with Hungary, reports that cannot be confirmed by Radio Free Europe.

It seems clear that the Hungarians have exaggerated the three military threats mentioned at Horn's news conference. On the other hand, they have not exaggerated Ceausescu's bitter hostility to Hungarian political reforms. Perhaps the Hungarian leadership wants to use these examples of Romanian military hostility to a socialist neighbor as a means of discrediting Ceausescu further. This hardly seems necessary. Or perhaps the leadership wants to use the alleged Romanian threat in an attempt to overcome divisions in Hungarian society and gain popular support on nationalist grounds.

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1 Henry Kiss, "Hungary Cites Military Threat From Romania," *The New York Times*, 11 July 1988.

2 *MTI*, in English, 10 July 1988.

3 *Bucur* (Budapest), 15 November 1988.

4 Radio Bucharest, 14 April 1989, 9:20 P.M. See also Romania Situation Report/4, Radio Free Europe Research, 4 May 1989, item 4.

- 5 See James Zubani Nagy, "Soviet-Bucharest Missile Business?" Budapesti Szombat, 29 May 1989. Another hypothesis was suggested by an Italian journalist who recently interviewed Horn. Andrea Tarquini, writing in *La Repubblica*, said that Romania had ordered Concor intermediate-range missiles from Argentina. (The Concor I was developed under the direction of the Argentine Air Force in the early 1980s, with technical help from Italian, French, and West German companies. Originally billed as a "space research vehicle," this 150-kilometer-range missile was displayed at the 1985 Paris Air Show. The Concor II is believed to be a follow-on ballistic missile with a possible range of up to 1,000 kilometers. Egypt and Iraq are rumored to be cooperating on this project. No test firings of this missile are known to have taken place.) In the Tarquini interview, Horn said that the Hungarians had warned Ceausescu at the recent Warsaw Pact summit in Bucharest that the threat of such missiles to European security "must not be underestimated." He added that Hungary had received no reply to this warning. Horn surmised that recent Romanian bellicosity had a "domestic purpose designed to intimidate the population. . . ." He added that an armed conflict between Hungary and Romania was out of the question, but the Romanian decisions were certainly causing political tension. The NYT account of this interview correctly attributed the information that Romania had ordered Concor missiles to Tarquini. It neither confirmed nor disputed his statement. See Andrea Tarquini, "Ceausescu in Buying Missiles to Aim at Hungary," *La Repubblica*, 26/27 July 1989; and NYT (Rome), 17 July 1989.
- 6 Same, *op. cit.*
- 7 NATO estimates, for example, that in 1985 Romania sold more arms to Third World nations than any other member of the Warsaw Pact except the USSR (Jonathan Braden, "Warsaw Pact Arms for Third World," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 23 May 1987, p. 9990. In the last year Romania has offered to sell arms to Nigeria, Iran, Iraq, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Egypt (see Jonathan Eyal, "Romania - a Dictator Breaking up New Mass Destruction Weapons," to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Jane's Soviet Intelligence Review*).
- 8 *Lupta Intelectuala* Paper, no. 4, 1989.
- 9 See Michael Shefir, "'Revisionism' Under Romanian General's Fire: Ceausescu's Brother Attacks Hungarian Positions", RAD Background Report/86 (Eastern Europe), SPER, 17 May 1989. For Hungarian reactions to Ilie Ceausescu's charges, see *HegyesHegy*, 17 May 1989, and *Hegyes Helyzet*, 24 June 1989.
- 10 See Kevin Devlin, "Hungary's New Defense Doctrine: 'Enemy Not the West But Romania,'" RAD BR/101, SPER, 16 June 1989.
- 11 *Hegyes Helyzet*, 29 June 1989.
- 12 TRAM (Budapest), 7 July 1989.
- 13 *Hegyes Helyzet*, 30 July 1989.
- 14 *Reflex*, 1 June 1989.

- 15 Radio Budapest, 1 July 1969, 8:45 A.M. In fact, some Soviet troops are redeploying from Hungary's Austrian frontier to bases near Romania, but the changes hardly seem connected with any Romanian threat. In line with the creation of a so-called "zone of peace" along the Austrian border, Soviet units from this area are moving to other bases in Hungary. On June 12 it was announced that a Soviet mechanized infantry regiment was pulling out of Szombathely (on the Austrian border) and moving to Debrecen (on the Romanian border). There has long been a sizable Soviet military presence in Debrecen (RFI, in English, 12 June 1969).
- 16 Major General Istvan Hencsik, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Hungarian Armed Forces. Quoted by Radio Budapest, 4 June 1969, 12:00 noon.
- 17 RTT, in English, 5 June 1969.
- 18 Ibid., op. cit.
- 19 Bratisla, 1 June 1969.
- 20 See Michael Shafir, "Romania and the Redoubt of Iron Wagon," RAD BR/117 (Eastern Europe), RFEW, 30 June 1968.
- 21 See Michael Shafir, "Nagyas Szoros's Interview with RFEW's Romanian Service," Ibid., no. 127, 20 July 1969.

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