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Romania: Authorities To Screen Officers Likely To Work With NATO Secrets

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By Eugen Tomiuc

Romania's government announced on 13 May a measure aimed at screening intelligence officials who are likely to have access to NATO secrets, should Romania be invited to join the alliance later this year. The measure comes after local and Western media suggested that NATO may be reluctant to share classified information with former members of the Communist-era secret police -- the Securitate -- who still hold sensitive positions within Romanian intelligence. But critics say screening standards should be more rigorous and that the measure has yet to prove its efficiency.

Prague, 16 May 2002 (RFE/RL) -- The Romanian government this week issued screening criteria for Romanian intelligence officials who could have access to NATO classified information, should Romania be invited to join the alliance later this year.

The government said the measure will allow the country to implement its classified-information law, adopted two months ago as part of Romania's bid to join the alliance.

Under the measure, clearance to work with classified NATO material will be granted to pertinent officials only after they obtain a so-called "security certificate" from the National Authority for Security, or ANS -- an agency within Romania's Foreign Ministry.

The measure also stipulates that access to NATO information be denied to those applicants with proven involvement in acts of political repression "in collaboration with the Securitate," Romania's notorious Communist-era political police.

The decision to check applicants' potential connections to the secret police comes amid a controversy -- triggered by recent reports in the Western media -- that NATO may be reluctant to share classified information with former Securitate agents who still hold sensitive positions within Romania's military intelligence.

Romania is stepping up efforts to meet NATO admissions criteria in the run-up to the alliance's November summit in Prague, when the 19-member bloc is expected to admit new members. Of the nine candidates, Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria sit in the middle with a 50 percent chance of entry.

The alliance has so far cited endemic corruption and economic doldrums as Romania's primary problems, but has refrained from officially admitting that the country's NATO bid could be hampered by the Securitate issue. Arianne Quentier, a NATO press officer, told RFE/RL: "We're reviewing as a whole whether Romania [has] a system [that] shares the same democratic values as ours. I think you'll have the answer to all that in Prague."

Analysts say that NATO, in reviewing the responsibilities of former Securitate officers who may now work in the army, could make a distinction between those who now hold operational positions and those who are there in consultative roles.

Professor Dennis Deletant of University College in London is an expert on issues regarding the Securitate. He said it is former secret-police agents now in consultative positions who could raise doubts within the alliance.

Deletant told RFE/RL that should Romania become a NATO member, such people could use their new positions to gain economic influence, among other things.

"At the level of consultative positions, the worry on the part of NATO is likely to be that these figures could use their influence for economic gain, for their own personal gain, because it is in the nature of things that intelligence services are aware of -- amongst other things -- economic opportunities that arise. They're the first people who often know of economic openings and it's in this area that NATO feels that competition between a person's interest to promote his individual position and economic situation, and the interest of the state, might clash," Deletant said.

Former Securitate members still hold key positions in Romanian business, politics, and the media.

Romanian deputy Ristea Priboi -- a former Securitate officer -- last year resigned as the head of a parliamentary committee in charge of overseeing Romania's foreign intelligence after news reports said he was believed to have worked in a department that coordinated attacks -- including a 1981 bombing -- on Radio Free Europe during the communist era.

But Priboi, a member of Prime Minister Adrian Nastase's Social Democrat Party, retained his seat in parliament.

Romanian media have constantly criticized Nastase's government for what they said was its failure to remove former members of the Securitate from army positions most likely to come into contact with NATO secrets, should Romania join the alliance.

Cornel Ivanciuc, a journalist with the "Academia Catavencu" weekly, said press investigations so far have uncovered nine former Securitate officers who were apparently involved in activities of political repression and now hold high positions within the General Direction of Defense Intelligence, or DGIA, the army's main intelligence structure.

Ivanciuc told RFE/RL that the government rushed to adopt the measure containing the screening procedures only after critical reports appeared in domestic and international media. Ivanciuc said the belated measure fails to provide the necessary tools to detect and remove former Securitate workers from sensitive capacities.

"The wording of our [government's measure] should have been much clearer and unequivocal, precisely because the communique [announcing the measure] is the expression of the will of [Romanian] political circles and government institutions. We would have wanted much more: We'd have wanted even an ultimatum-like document, to state in unequivocal terms whether somebody did or did not collaborate [with the communist-era secret police]," Ivanciuc said.

Romanian officials dismissed the criticism. Government spokesman Claudiu Lucaci told RFE/RL the screening measures were determined according to the schedule and criteria contained in the country's NATO Membership Action Plan, or MAP, which was devised together with the alliance.

Deletant of University College says much will depend on how fast and efficient such measures -- together with the newly adopted classified-information law -- will be implemented.

"In respect to the Romanian legislation, I think the important thing is to see how far it is implemented, because -- not only in Romania, but indeed in [the case of recently admitted NATO members] Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary, where similar legislation was introduced -- we have a situation whereby on paper, the legislation seems fine, but in the actual application of it, certain difficulties arise and it's only after the law is applied that these problems emerge," Deletant said.

At a news briefing this week, top Romanian defense officials said they have not been questioned about the existence of former Securitate agents within the army during talks with NATO.

Romania's army currently numbers just under 100,000 troops, with an additional 25,000 civilian personnel.

General Gheorghe Rotaru, the head of DGIA, announced at the briefing that over the past two years, some 53,000 army personnel -- both military and civilian -- who came into contact with NATO officials obtained a security clearance from the National Authority for Security. However, he did not specify how many of those screened failed to obtain clearance.

Furthermore, General Rotaru admitted that at least some of the nine DGIA officers named in the Romanian media as being former members of the Securitate worked "for a short period of time within structures other than the Defense Ministry's."

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