

Bulgarian Top Brass Denied Access to NATO Secrets

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Decision to withhold security clearance for country's military chiefs reignites row over ties to the western alliance.

NATO security checks have denied Bulgarian army chiefs access to its top military secrets. The veto, coming months after the country joined the western alliance, has caused a crisis in the Bulgarian military and become an issue in the current pre-election campaign.

General Dimitur Georgiev, commander-in-chief of the Bulgarian Air Force, last week was refused access to NATO secrets after failing the security check system, which was set up between Bulgaria and Alliance Command.

The check was undertaken by a body composed solely of Bulgarian nationals, known as the State Committee for Protection of Classified Information. It did not reveal the reasons for its decision, but accepted full responsibility.

Bulgaria joined NATO in April and actively participates in all its activities now. It is overhauling its army, cutting troop numbers to 45,000 from over 100,000 in the 1990s, and adapting communications, infrastructure and armaments to NATO standards.

Unlike Hungary and the Czech Republic, however, the Bulgarian army did not undergo a process of screening out Soviet-era personnel or those seen as most complicit with the former regime. Its Soviet-era generals have either retired, or remain part of the army senior staff.

Now, some apparently do not meet the new security criteria that NATO membership implies. As part of Bulgaria's integration into the alliance, the classified information committee was formed and empowered to conduct preliminary scrutiny and approve those officials entrusted with access to alliance secrets.

The recent denial of access to General Georgiev is the third such case to reach public attention.

Earlier, Emil Vulev, one of Bulgaria's top diplomats, was turned down as ambassador to NATO after failing the same security checks. General Pavlomir Kunchev was also rejected for the post of Bulgarian military representative at NATO's Europe headquarters in Mons, Belgium, for the same reason.

The three cases have triggered a national debate, but many others remain unknown to the public, the security committee chairman, Tsveta Markova, told IWPR.

Although the body is not obliged to explain its decisions, it is bound to follow certain strict criteria. The committee's official website contains a list of possible circumstances that may lead to disqualification. They include lifestyle problems, such as addiction to narcotics and alcohol, and differences between declared income and standard of living.

However, Markova was clear that the main issue is a more political one, namely "disloyalty to Bulgaria in the context of its NATO membership".

While the Bulgarian media has speculated about General Georgiev's connections to the Communist-era state security body, the Durzhavna Sigurnost, the general himself has refused to comment on his rejection. His superior, General Nikola Kolev, chief of the general staff, declined a request from IWPR to interview the general.

The affair may have harmed Bulgaria's image as a NATO partner.

The BBC cited a British military analyst, Paul Beaver, as saying that the alliance "sees a real problem in Bulgaria's reluctance to retire its Soviet-trained and qualified top [military officials], as has been done in other ex-communist countries, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia".

The deputy speaker of the Bulgarian parliament, Asen Agov, a member of its foreign policy, defence and security committee, supported this assertion. He said that what he called an "improper choice" of top army commanders had acted to "discredit Bulgaria as an ally".

Other observers are less worried, describing the rejections as simple teething problems. Valeri Rachev, an analyst and deputy head of the Bulgarian military academy, said recent events echoed what had happened in Poland after it joined NATO. "There is no global problem with loyalty in the army," he said. "New criteria were introduced and not all of the senior officials could meet them."

Markova is yet more optimistic, saying the security rejections were routine and had also occurred in the old NATO member countries. The only difference in Bulgaria was the publicity that the cases had generated, she said.

However, the case of the general has the potential to cause ructions inside Bulgaria's army hierarchy. The general holds a key position and analysts say he cannot continue to perform his duties without access to NATO classified information.

According to Agov, the only remaining option is to move him sideways - or out. "General Georgiev could not conduct the Bulgarian Air Force in the frame of the alliance's collective defence," Agov said. "His remaining at his current post is unthinkable."

Markova, more cautiously, concurred with this, saying international practice suggested that when officials facing this dilemma stayed at their old posts, it was not for long.

General Kolev has tried hard to retain Georgiev at his post, however. He was quoted by Bulgaria's Mediapool news agency as saying he could continue to perform his tasks as he had only been denied access to top level secrets, implying that he enjoyed access to lower-level information.

Markova, disputed this, saying that while varying levels of secrecy existed within NATO, General Georgiev had access to none of them.

President Georgi Purvanov, member of the traditionally pro-Russian Socialist Party, and who as a head of state is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, has also come out in support of General Georgiev.

The president's public intervention, implying mistrust in the jointly established security procedures, has only added fuel to the media debate over the country's new ties with NATO. The press have cited the case as proof that both the president and chief of the general staff are willing to sacrifice the country's relationship with NATO in order to keep top military officials in place.

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